Oracle of Tao

Samantha Rinne Hooker

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ISBN: 9798654481580

Imprint: Independently published

Binding Type: Paperback

Self-Published by Amazon KDP
Published in the United States

Rest in Peace,
Miss Kitty!
Return to the Tao,and roam around
and play, deep within the creepy cool
Eternal Forest,
where time resets.
To God
For letting me
name you feminine
names like Kyria or Emily.
For being all the people I've met,
or loved, or even gotten really mad at.
For being every bit like God in this book,
even those times when you're salty and mean,
and for giving me really weird experiences
to write about. I mean, seriously...
For being in my best and worst
moments, and in my dearest
friends, and letting me
write this without
being smitten.
Thank you.
To all those
people who feel
unloved, unclean, lonely,
unwanted, rejected, abused,
paranoid, depressed,or abandoned.
This book is for you. You are not alone.

And so the little Rabbit was put into a sack with the old picture-books and a lot of rubbish, and carried out to the end of the garden behind the fowl-house. That was a fine place to make a bonfire, only the gardener was too busy just then to attend to it. He had the potatoes to dig and the green peas to gather, but next morning he promised to come quite early and burn the whole lot...
The Velveteen Rabbit.

“I form the light and create darkness,
I bring prosperity and create disaster;
I, the **LORD**, do all these things...
Isaiah 45:7, *Holy Bible, New International Version.*

“It's like in the great stories, Mr. Frodo. The ones that really mattered. Full of darkness and danger they were. And sometimes you didn't want to know the end… because how could the end be happy? How could the world go back to the way it was, when so much bad had happened? But in the end, it’s only a passing thing… this shadow. Even darkness must pass.”
Sam Gamgee, *Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*

One night I dreamed a dream. As I was walking along the beach with my Lord, across the dark sky flashed scenes from my life. For each scene, I noticed two sets of footprints, one belonging to me and one to my Lord. As my life flashed before me, I looked back at the footprints in the sand. I noticed that at the lowest times, there was only one set of footprints. This really troubled me, so I asked the Lord about it. “Lord, you said once I decided to follow you, you'd walk with me all the way. But I noticed that during the saddest times of my life, there was only one set of footprints. I don't understand why, when I needed you most, you would leave me.” He whispered, “My precious child, I love you and will never leave you. When you saw one set of footprints, that was when I carried you.”
Footprints on the Sand.

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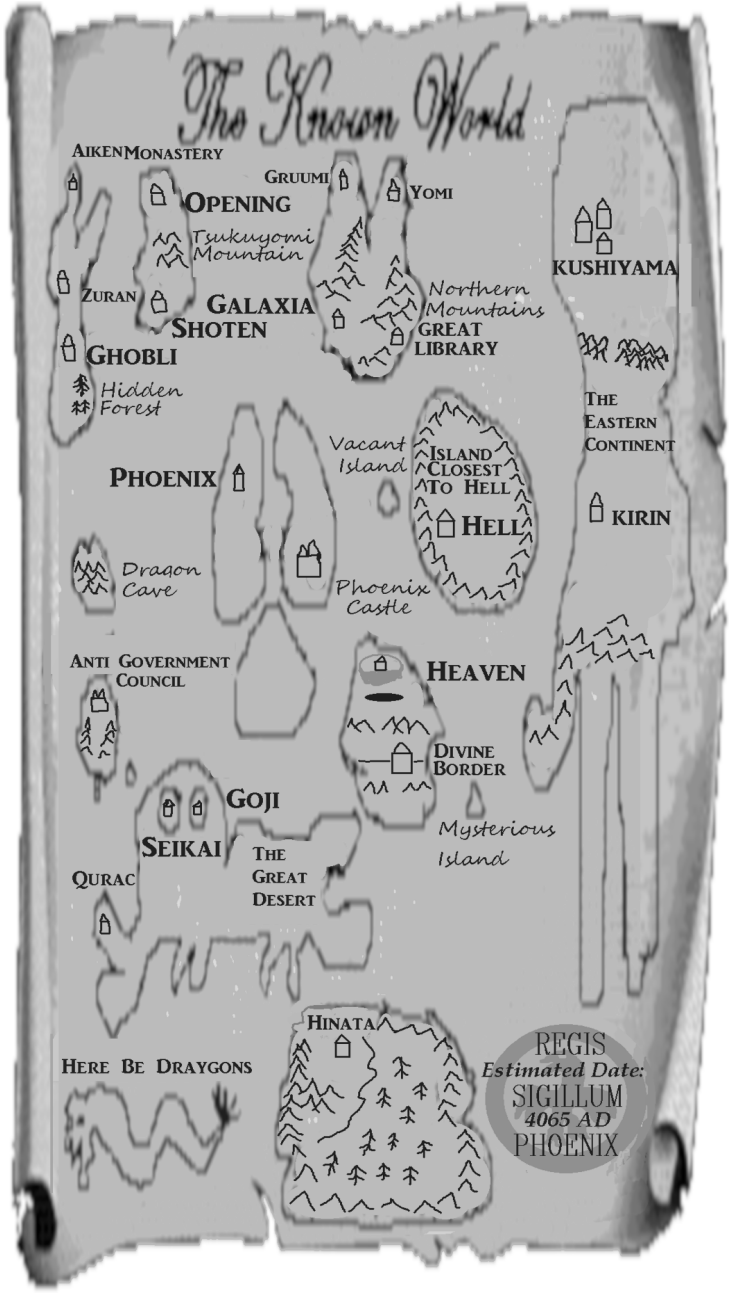
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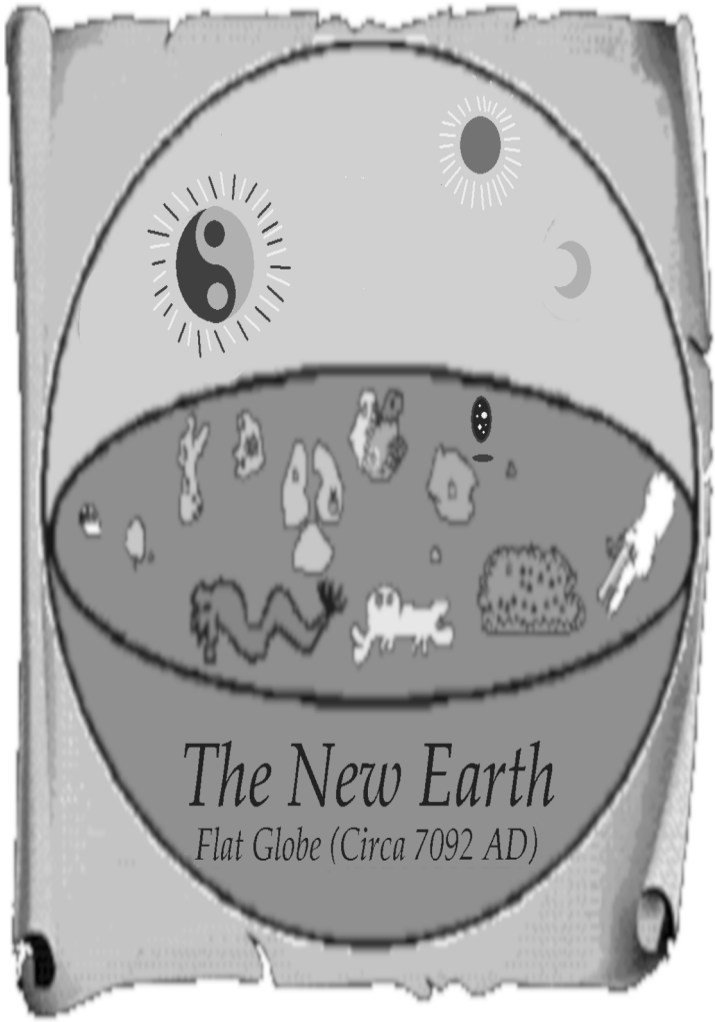
AIKEN MONASTERY
GRUUMI
YOMI
OPENING
Tsukuyomi Mountain
KUSHIYAMA
ZURAN
GALAXIA
SHOTEN
Northern Mountains
GREAT LIBRARY
GHOBLI
Hidden Forest
THE EASTERN CONTINENT
Vacant Island
ISLAND CLOSEST TO HELL
PHOENIX
HELL
KIRIN
Dragon Cave
Phoenix Castle
ANTI GOVERNMENT COUNCIL
HEAVEN
DIVINE BORDER
GOJI
SEIKAI
Mysterious Island
THE GREAT DESERT
QURAC
HINATA
HERE BE DRAYGONS
REGIS
Estimated Date:
SIGILLUM
4065 AD
PHOENIX


The New Earth
Flat Globe (Circa 7092 AD)

Author's Note

This is a work of fantasy. I wrote Oracle of Tao as a role-playing game for the PC, but I decided to make an adaptation for novel. As such, the interpretation of religion and how the afterlife works is different from what one might normally expect. In particular, I wanted to dismiss the notion of a fire and brimstone Hell, and a harps and fluffy cloud Heaven. Though I kinda played up those cliches, the Afterlife is something that you make it to be and closer to being rejected by your dearest friend and being unable to speak with her (bad) or having exactly what you need and being content (good). The idea being that Heaven/Hell are about human feelings, not physical reality.

As much as possible, I tried to create a sense of immersion, so I used Chinese and Japanese, or in some cases Hebrew or Sanskrit characters. Whenever possible, I tried to make it possible to figure out what I was saying though. Or I made text effects or background art. Do not adjust your screen, as they say, it's intended that way.

My story may contain indirect or direct pop culture references. I played a large share of games growing up, in addition to reading books, and watching movies. The characters in question live in a world where our pop culture happened, thousands of years ago.

This story has some adult material, and as such is not okay for children. This book also contains religious themes, but I'm not pushing specific beliefs. I don't expect to convert anyone, these are my beliefs, and you ought to figure out what you believe. I have some interesting opinions on religion, politics, and sexuality. Mostly this is an allegory about the need for other people. If one has friends they can truly trust, no crisis is too great. Especially right now, where everyone's stuck inside.

The latest version of this removes the heavy-handed stuff about the apocalypse, and attempts to get the book more in line with my other works, for example adding Slimeborn as a race. The idea was a sense of literary continuity.

Oh yes, one final note. This book combines all three parts of a trilogy. I tried to condense it to fit into a certain number of pages, but this meant that I had to basically tweak the size and trim margins, because normal size would make the book easily over 1000 pages long! Also, I'm having to tweak paragraphs to prevent dangling (where a paragraph ends with one word, wasting entire lines).

Oracle of Tao

Book I
Raggedy Woman

CHAPTER 1

In which Ambrosia attempts to leave town.

AMBROSIA

My adopted family told me this story. Before the Earth we know of now, there was another created, with eons of history. The world had all kinds of plants and animals, and people worshiping a bunch of different religions. Despite what they thought, God didn't care whether they worshiped one or another, just so long as they took care of the Earth, and each other. But they couldn't even get that right! I mean, how hard is it, really? So, God intervened… God split the world into light and darkness, a world of Existence and a world of Void. Anyway, I don't really care about history. The only thing I know is, a few thousand years ago, God made a prophecy. If Evil ever came again, God would send an Oracle to bring the universe back to balance… and stuff. But that'll never happen.

Ummm, my name is Ambrosia. I'm Ambrosia Brahman. My memories have always been kinda fuzzy. Not like regular people either, where they can remember until about age three or so (childhood amnesia, I think Elias called it), I can't remember anything clearly before about nine years or so. All I remember is my adopted parents. They were an old couple, and they were really sweet, but of course they died recently, and I wound up on the street.

The town where I was staying has no name. It used to be called the town of Opening, but that was scratched out, and now you can write anything you want, provided there are only 10 letters or numbers. I've chosen to call it _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _, for now anyway. It's a pretty shabby town, honestly. The town has big walls on all sides, and a curfew and guards on the top. Not because there are national threats or anything, but because the town was just run by insane and brutal thugs. The residential district is filled with nothing but one-room clay huts, ruins, and small houses. To be fair, there is a lot in the way of business: a bounty hunting board, a bank, a healer, a few stores, and so on. But to be honest, most of these "businesses" tend to involve a man or woman, or in some cases a child, standing outside a warehouse or near a pile of goods. The houses they go home to tend to have only the slightest amount of furnishings, and some of these only seem to have just a chest. I can't imagine how these people sleep, unless they open the chest and sleep inside. The only thing decent about life here is that some townspeople decided to built me a bed outside. But even so, it isn't a particularly safe bed, it rains and gets hit by lightning, and every now and then small wild animals slip into the cracks of the town walls and bite me. Oh yeah, and the well-water I have for drinking usually makes me sick. Did I mention how much I hate this town?

Hmmm? Who am I talking to? I honestly don't know, anyone out there who will listen, I guess. I'm pretty lonely, and it feels good to talk to someone, even if ultimately it seems like I'm talking to myself. But I'm ***not*** crazy! Am I?

In the western part of town, there's houses packed together in a slum. It's almost as if someone took some type of digital editor and just rubber-stamped them. But I'm not supposed to know about such things. After the New Earth, most technology we find is pre-industrial. There are robots from the original Earth, but alchemy, thaumaturgy, and religion tends to be the way of things. Nobody understands technology anymore, so they can't build these things. Alchemy can produce some advanced stuff, but it's like some sort of chemical magic. So, digital editors? Nah, I don't know about those. Even though I just mentioned them.

Just east of that was a house obviously built by outsiders. It is totally at odds with the building style of the rest of the town. I hate outlanders. They come in and try to change everything. Well, they could be nice. But I haven't bothered to knock on the door. By the way, I'm an outsider myself. I was born in another town. But yea, I hate outsiders.

At the very north of town is a graveyard. It is, of course, haunted. Whenever I try to go there alone, a crazy old woman winds up giving me Jar of Human Tears. She tells me, "The sadness inside tends to repel evil spirits," so that I can visit in peace. I have no idea who that woman is, but it's like looking at someone incredibly familiar, and I wish I cold

look as good as her when I'm old. Whenever I leave the graveyard, she vanishes like a ghost, only to reappear again when I return to encourage me to be safe.

I enjoy visiting the graves. There's something very peaceful about all of these markers here. I take a quick glance at the stones, « Here lies Gregory Smith, the last worshiper of Christianity (3000-3075 AD)», «Moten Yoshi, firstborn of New Earth (4000-4065 AD)», and so on. My favorite grave is near the top, it reads, «Here lies Sarai Jianne, beloved of Yazim Jianne (7045-7073 AD).» I think I like this one because it's so recent. She died about three years ago right in this town. Every so often, I see new flowers there.

I awoke in my bed in town, cold and hungry. I manage to live despite being dirt poor by fighting off rats and eating them. Thank God for the root veggies that the farmer in town grows or I'd be really sick. Rat is not all that appetizing, I must say. It has an oil that it gives off, so the meat I ate smells like rat. This also gives it a kind of strong aftertaste and very gamy texture. It isn't for the faint of heart.

I didn't have a knife for killing or cutting up meat. I had only a fishing pole. It's handy for catching fish, but pretty awful for fighting. Thankfully, it's pretty sturdy. They were a bit tricky to kill being so fast and determined, but after a few good whacks on their spines, about three of them were dead or dying, and the others decided that I'm not worth messing with. I shouted after them, "That's right, you'd better run!" Although I wanted to roast them on a spit (there are no laws against that), well...I kinda couldn't. There were no public fire pits or anything, and I had no flint, and definitely no steel. While I could conceivably have used the pole itself to make fire, it had served me well over the years. Anyway, I would never have done that, as this was a very important gift from my childhood. So yeah, I was totally gonna eat rat with its fur mostly on and raw. As usual.

I had very little to do today, since I had no job, no money, and nothing much else. Thankfully, while there is no welfare system, generally people are allowed to build houses or sleep anywhere.

Our town was not in recession, but despite my best efforts, I haven't managed to secure anything remotely resembling a job thanks to zero skills. I hadn't been on the street very long, and didn't know how to craft anything. So I couldn't start really my own business either. One thing I was good at was being pathetic, so begging was a natural fit. There is no income tax and no property tax, but work laws are soft, so anyone is able to make money through almost any means. Yes, this means that prostitution, con-artistry, begging, or even outright theft is considered okay. The guards only prevent the violent crimes such as rape, murder, or armed robbery.

This morning, I went begging, hoping to get a little bit more. Maybe I could save enough to get some better clothes or fresh yak meat from the shop, or maybe even eventually get a real weapon. With something to cut food and start a fire with, at the very least, I could have warm meat rather than cold unskinned rat. After an hour of begging, some strange person in a heavy cloak said, "Take this money, you seem to need it," handing me a bag filled with coins of Gold. They walked off before I could thank whoever it was.

Gold was of various shapes and sizes, depending on the region, but the price was standardized by the Council. I held up a coin. On the front, I saw a beautiful woman standing over a violent crowd with the words «*Victoria Dei Gratia Regina*» over her head and «*Sic Semper Tyrannis*» running below the scene. I turned the coin over and saw an image resembling a large chicken or something, covered in flames, with «*Regina Phoenix Fidei Defensor 7062 AD*» on top and «*In Deus Nos Fide*» on the bottom. To write all of this legibly meant the coin was as big as what that old country of America called a half-dollar. It was mostly gold, with just enough other metal to make it firm to the touch. This was a Gold coin minted under the reign of Queen Victoria, but it was supposedly not minted like other currency. Gold from Phoenix was usually better made than the average, while that of Kushiyama tended to be worse. Along with Hinata's Gold with its images of natural landscapes and shrines with unreadable text, there was one coin from Kushiyama in this bag. Unlike Phoenix's Gold, that one has the image and inscription of their leader on it as though he were an omnipotent god-emperor (it even described him in Latin as "King Yama, Almighty Lord of his Kingdom"). Far from commanding respect or love, anyone so forceful is generally seen as a tyrant. All Gold

was valued the same technically, but when it down to it, people preferred Phoenix-minted Gold, while Kushiyama-minted Gold was treated almost like counterfeit. After counting my findings, I dropped that one coin on the ground; nobody picked it up. There were also Silver and Copper coins among this bag, but they weren't much used, since it took 100 Copper or 10 Silver to equal even one Gold.

Having more than a few coins was definitely a different experience, almost like trying to dive for clams or mussels, and finding pearls instead. I would like to say I felt joy or gratitude, but that's not quite true. This is not to say I'm bitter, or petty, or anything like that. I just couldn't *feel* much of anything. Maybe it was from depression, or maybe it was something else. My heart went kind of cold, and nothing much mattered. But with this money, things would change, I was sure of it.

The woman ahead of me bought some sturdy shoes and some climbing gear. She headed off for the side wall, obviously to leave. Lately, the guards have taken to charging money for exiting town. Since income tax is basically out, this is one of the main ways of earning money for the town. So a lot of people have taken instead to climbing the wall nearby. The town guard try to catch them when they do this, but they aren't supposed to attack those who have left the town borders, so it's a losing battle. She made it halfway up the wall when a group of guards grabbed her and knocked her down with some wrestling move, then hauled her off. We never saw her in town again. While they were distracted with her, another one managed to leave. The guards strung their bows, but it was too late. The Council had set their jurisdiction at town limits after all.

I was now at the head of the line in this "shop" near the southern gate, deciding what to purchase. Normally, they would quickly find that I have no money, and tell me, "In that case, **leave**!!!" After which, I would be tossed bodily in the air. But this time was different. This time, they saw a big pouch by my side (which could be filled with rocks). The sales lady decided to take a chance on me, though. She asked, "What would you like, sonny?" Ignoring the fact that she obviously needed glasses, I said, "I'd like some fresh yak meat."

I normally don't pay attention to how people look. This is not to say I'm a snob or anything, I just don't have many friends. Most people either seem to be looking at me like I'm just another beggar and scoff, or they just walk past after a glance. However, since I've been in this line for nearly an hour, I had a good chance to look at her. She was ordinary-looking, with long brown hair swept to one side and a green pleated dress with a hood and pair of good hiking shoes. I'm sure she's tried climbing the wall too, back in the day. As I wasn't going to become a frequent customer, I didn't bother looking any closer at her, but she seemed like the type of lady that might have children or cats to feed at home. The store closed early, and I didn't want to keep her waiting. As I moved close enough to tell that I was, in fact, a woman, she replied, "What cut of meat do you wish to have, my lady?"

"My lady." I couldn't say that I am really anyone's idea of a lady. Looking in the mirror behind the near-sighted woman, I saw a willowy malnourished girl who desperately needed that yak meat right now. I had straight natural blue hair that used to be in a neat ponytail, but at the moment had curled from grease and darkened with grime to the point of looking brownish-black. My skin, once a pale peach, was also similarly dusty, making me look tanner than I was. I originally wore a nice sturdy leather dress, but time outside had scuffed it up to the point of being ragged. Yet my eyes were still as clear and blue as ever, and they focused on the goal of fresh meat. I drooled at the thought.

I thought about her question. Yak meat looked different from beef. Unlike cows, yaks have their fat layer as outer blubber instead of that nice marbling. But once that's all done, it cuts into clean pieces. I observed all of this as she cut, telling her repeatedly that I did not in fact want the blubber, despite her claims that *everyone* loves it. "Yes, but I don't," I said, as she shot an annoyed glare at me for making her scrape this off. Instead, I ordered, "Let's go with a few slices of stew meat. Ummm, maybe some cooking gear too." She handed me a soup pot, skillet, metal bowl, some forks, metal chopsticks, and spoons. I would have to go somewhere else for a good knife and flint though. She put all the cooking materials into a cloth bag, wrapped the yak meat into parchment paper and

handed it over to me.

I was just about to congratulate myself for a smart purchase, and I walked over to a remote sandy spot to somehow build a fire; no sooner had I placed the meat onto the pot though, than a group of hungry worms attacked! And by worms, I don't mean those tiny cute little nightcrawlers or the redworms that eat compost to make soil. The name for these worms is *olgoi khorkoi.* They are worms fully large enough to shake the ground and create large holes, and their mouths are as big as I am. These worms and their sister race, sandworms, were roughly the size of a small tree. These had no eyes or teeth and these ignored live food, but fresh meat was another story. I swung my fishing pole at them, but it bounced of their rubbery flesh. The worms appeared to have a deep fear of the hook of the fishing pole; despite not hurting it at all, it shrunk in fear. Perhaps they knew that should I catch them on my line and somehow have super-strength enough to haul them into the sea, they would end up as bait for some enormous fish that I also couldn't pull. After trying, and missing, in a charge attack, one of them emptied its... well, whatever. It puked on me. Centuries of pesticides, artificial fertilizers, and soil additives created toxins inside the body of the worm that produced a sort of heavy substance. Although they do not have what one would call stomach acid and it wasn't acid or basic enough to burn my skin, some of these chemicals paralyzed me and put me in shock.

Having gorged themselves on my food, they had little interest in trying to eat someone like me, even if they were not eaters of dead food. I was simply too dirty for the worms. When I came to my senses, all of my meat was gone. I was so tired of being lonely, poor, and hungry. "**Why**?!?" I cried.

GOD

I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the Lord, do all these things. I am eternal. Everything past, present, and future constantly exists, and whatever I see is also me. It is not for me to explain my ways. Any humans that I would use to do so would be accused of heresy or insanity. After all, how would any humans convince others that I have indeed spoken to them? Shall I come to them in a dream? They tend not to remember what they dream clearly, in any case. Perhaps, I could come to them in a waking vision, but alas, even if it is a mass event, they completely ignore my actual message. I come to them as myself, and they are terrified.

Let me be clear to you, the Reader (yes, I know of you who see this writing). I do not wish evil on anyone. I am not trying to punish them, but rather there are situations where granting one person what they want would interfere with what many other people need. There are also times when events happen for human growth, although even here, I allow free will. I do not act as some omnipotent control freak, but rather only intervene if things are out of hand. And I constantly worry if these humans will hate me if I should act, or curse me if I do nothing.

There are people like Ambrosia, who seem to get an awful deal from life despite my attempts to help. I make no excuses for this, even though it is sometimes human free will and not my actions that is the cause of this. As much as possible, I try to mitigate some of the harm caused through the conflicting intentions in the course of human life, but there is only so much even a God like me can do openly. If I were to act too much, I would create dependence, while if I were to do nothing, I would cause even the atheist humans to fall into despair. For example, when the *olgoi khorkoi* attacked Ambrosia, there were originally supposed to be four worms, and one of these would trample her after she was paralyzed. Her unconscious body would wind up crushed into a pulp under its weight. However, the extra worm found itself cut off by an underground mineral deposit, and had to redirect itself to somewhere else. Meanwhile, while I have expressly forbidden myself from interfering in free will of both humans and other living things, I could still make the meat extra moist to distract them.

Yes, you heard correctly. The answer to the omnipotence paradox is this: I could not be omnipotent without the ability to set limits for myself, yet I could also not be omnipotent without the ability humans call potential. I have created specific limits to my power, just as humans have Ten Commandments. I do not wish to rule humanity, only to save them if they should risk destroying themselves. The rules were written for mortal

races and matter, so beings like angels/demons, or First Materials were not subject.

1. Thou shalt not be seen by humans in thy true form, for normal mortals may die.
2. Thou shalt never remove free will from a living thing. Lest you disobey, thou shalt never be able to. Thou shalt not govern the people as a tyrant.
3. Thou mayst appear to individual humans in a comely and innocuous form of thy choosing, or in dreams, visions, or an avatar. Thou shalt not directly act to interfere with any personal action or religious belief, unless all humanity is at risk. Thou shalt not possess humans, but thou mayst speak through them.
4. Thou shalt not make eternal beings or indestructible matter. For all living things, unless they discover or earn the secret of eternity, are subject to death and rebirth; likewise all matter is subject to decay.
5. Thou shalt not cause a living thing to be stripped of its reincarnation memories once it attained the ability to remember them, nor give any living thing ability to remember reincarnation that they have not justly earned.
6. Thou shalt not set a human apart from others, either as a pariah or a favored one.
7. Thou shalt not interfere in the time-space continuum, as thou wilt branch reality. Only if thou must save a life, mayst thou reverse an event. If by saving a life, it is as though you have saved the whole world It must be done.
8. Thou mayst grant prayers, yet they must have proper faith, and they canst not be prayers to harm others, even indirectly. Thou shalt not undo previous prayers.
9. Thou shalt not reveal the secrets of reality, except to the one who deserves them.
10. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

The last commandment sounds like it's merely a sweet saying, and for humans, it probably is. But for me it means that any and all things I might do to humans, such as smiting them or causing suffering, have a very high chance of causing me some pain. I cannot exactly die, but I am able to suffer the pain of death.

Ultimately, with all my cosmic powers, on an average day, I mainly deal in coincidences. This person got here a little later or earlier, that man recovered from illness, or occasionally I might perform an *It's a Wonderful Life* type of miracle, creating an alternate reality to help people. In the life of most humans, they never have any strong reason to believe in me, which is fine. It's not like I need human worship, or to be honest, particularly enjoy it. It's not to say I am indifferent or don't like people, though. I mourn their suffering, and I cry and laugh when watching the plays and shows they make. But when I see thousands of them die each day, I have to keep my heart protected from the loss. This day was different, however. For this day, the universe needed an Oracle.

I heard the girl Ambrosia cry out, “Why?!?” and I answered. Whenever I decide to appear to a mortal, I have a decision to make. But I knew this mortal personally. She would not care about anything she dreamed, she did not care what others said to her, and she had an absolutely tacky aesthetic when it came to miracles.

I caused all of her surroundings to fall away, leaving her standing in a blank white space. Of course, to everyone nearby, she was basically staring out into space having a heated conversation with herself. She was not the type to care, and people of this town knew of her habit of talking to herself. This is one of the reasons that I stick to appearing in dreams, they tend to draw less awkward looks. Although I could certainly speak as a regular person might, part of this type of thing is theatrics. Even if it is completely impractical, people tend to expect the smoke and mirrors approach. They want to see Oz the Great and Powerful, not that person behind the curtain. I appeared to her as a giant floating triangle thing. A person of the old Earth might recognize this from popular culture, but alas this was well before her time. Humans might assume this was a trademarked symbol, yet this was already stolen from the Hojo family crest. In any case, for the sake of performance, I spoke to her in a still voice. *Young child, do not fret over your fortune. For in your hands lies the power to change destiny. You must become the Oracle of Tao in order to defeat evil, and make the Earth freed to the balance of Good and Evil.*

I continued, *You must awaken the Crests... Seek Delphi, the first Oracle to awaken your inner power... She will advise you. But you must hurry, because evil seeks to remake this world as well. Go now, and return Balance to the Earth.*

Ambrosia replied, “Wait, but...?” I realized nothing I said made any sense to her, and it was all very cliche and cheesy, but I also knew this was precisely what would motivate her to do her task. After finishing, I returned her to awareness of the world around her.

AMBROSIA

After a very strange hallucination, I noticed two things were obvious. First, I had a different set of clothes, my rags replaced with a brown blouse, a red skirt, and white apron. I was wearing a pair of convertible shoes where before my feet were pretty much naked. Convertible shoes used a series of drawstrings which opened into sandals or closed into boots. Right now, they looked like a pair of simple brown boots without heels. My hair and the rest of me was wiped clean of all dirt, and I no longer looked quite as starved. I looked almost like a housewife! It was only after my palm began to sting that I noticed a tattoo on it. It was a Yin Yang symbol, and there seemed to be a strange sort of power coming from it. I ignored it completely. Strange marks are nothing to worry about, just like those nasty bites I got from rats a week or two ago. And that time I got bitten by a tick. And the spider, and... Okay, okay, I'll go to the healer!

We have always had doctors or healers, but they haven't always been good. For many years, medicine was a subset of religion, since healing others was seen as a civic duty, and thus it fell under the moral domain. But as belief in faith healing faded, along came the so-called “modern” medical era where the medical symbol (Rod of Asclepius) was confused with the commerce/thieves symbol (Caduceus), where one of these things had too many snakes. And it showed.

The difference between our medicine and the “medicine” of former ages was incredible! Back in those days, treating just the symptoms was the norm and research was the exception, and doctors would actually be punished for doing their own research, often losing licensing for questioning established dogma. For example, regarding cancer treatment, actual studies showed that immunosuppressants worsen cancer because cancer was a failing immune system. So while they could have treated people with immunotherapy, or used a diet approach (using herbs like ginger, raw garlic, cayenne pepper, basil, and turmeric as well as foods with antioxidant or probiotic properties like fresh vegetables, fish, milk/cheese/yogurt, and fresh fruit; all that and lowering sugar and radiated/burnt/processed foods), they instead prescribed three major treatments that were counterproductive and heavily suppressed other treatments. Despite the fact that radiation caused cancer, despite the fact that chemotherapy suppressed the immune system, and despite that all but the least invasive surgery made the body weaker, they went ahead and prescribed these treatments. The medical system collapsed once people began to learn that roughly 75% of these same doctors would not do this on themselves.

And then there was insurance. Insurance normally worked but when medical insurance became mandated, it screwed with supply and demand. When everyone was made to buy it, people who never went to the doctor balked at the idea of paying expensive insurance because of people who smoked all the time. Nowadays, medical insurance doesn't exist, having been replaced by barter and sliding-scale pricing.

Thankfully, we don't have these problems anymore. Today's view of things is that all disease is caused by imbalance in the body or spirit, such as lack of rest, starvation, or overeating. So while germs are a thing, everyone knows you can't get sick unless you are already less than whole. It also means that the average person knows and practices good health habits. This is why even though I did not know much about a lot of things, everyone with basic education at least knew about this stuff. Medicine nowadays also has no side effects, because its motto is “If Doing Something Would Harm, First Do Nothing.” They have three effective systems: applied organics (herbalism), symbolic medicine, and unified faith theory.

After studying herbs, and properties of food, medics combined nutrition and herbalism into a unified whole. They had certain salves rubbed over the body, certain foods, and certain bacteria that helped the body heal or fight disease. Of course, some adventurers just use the herbs alone, so Healing Herb and Medical Leaf have become top sellers for people suffering from poisons and other issues. Over time alchemy became part of this, so things like Potions and High Potions became common for wounds.

The second method of medicine is the one I have the most trouble explaining. They call it symbolic medicine. At one point, people studied psychology and the placebo effect, and found that a lot of the people seemed to have ailments that were ruled out as hypochondria. After trying several methods, they recognized that many of these diseases had a symbolic cause. For example, you had a throat issue because you wouldn't talk about something. And that's kinda as far as I understand.

After the New Earth, people discovered elves and other races, and discovered that they had a different theory of how stuff like faith works. Human knowledge before that was that faith was just something in your head. But then, the elves showed a visible energy wavelength when praying. It didn't seem to matter what they prayed to. The elves explained that the body is made of several types of energy, and every conscious action was the spirit body altering the physical world. So when you pray, the spirit resonates or something, and reality shifts. I guess? We called the process of performing spiritual acts thaumaturgy, or literally, "the working of wonders." People sometimes called it "magic" but this often meant using natural or elemental forces. But thaumaturgy was hard to say, so some people called it magic anyway. There's also the arcane way, also called sorcery or Onmyodo, but the less said about that, the better. These were people who tried to alter reality, after all. This was against God's law. I think?

When people first studied thaumaturgy, they found it varied by denominations. Each of these religions resonated energy in a different pattern, so certain groups like the Zoroastrians were better at setting fires, others like the Buddhists were better at exorcism/healing, and some were better at other stuff. Unless God or nature or whatever decides to lend energy (this is usually called a miracle), a good portion of the person's own energy goes into a prayer. This uses mystic power (or MP), which kinda means they can't heal all day because eventually they will become too exhausted to continue. So yeah, medical clinics can suddenly close in the middle of the day.

When faith works against the natural laws of the universe, it meets resistance called disbelief. It's like this. Unlike a simple healer, a priest can resurrect the dead or remove curses. But a priest on his own power can raise the same body a limited number of times without divine intervention, and after about three or four days of rot has difficulty raising anyone. And if the body is destroyed completely, revival typically only happens with a miracle. This is made worse when disbelief becomes unbelief, because it is shared by masses of people who lack faith. Such a thing is a sort of magical "dead zone." Thaumaturgy usually works through a type of spoken/written magical particle called runes, and could do healing at range; on the other hand, the average healer used their own aura to heal through a process similar to *reiki*. Aura-based magic could heal even in an area of unbelief or antimagic, but it could typically only be done by touch.

Today, hospitals almost don't exist, outside of big cities. And all of those are mostly outpatient (since even the common cold can now be cured easily with a touch). The idea of packing sick people together in a closed space and expecting them to get better is hopelessly stupid, which is why those remaining hospitals are typically open-air buildings with screens. This lesson honestly took millennia to learn, despite leprosy being proof that quarantines didn't work . Today's healers are broadly trained to prevent overspecialization, and they make house calls. They also wander around outside, wearing their distinctive medical robes. Anyone who wants to be healed simply has to touch their robe to get their attention. I approached the old healer. He was a nice guy, especially since I usually couldn't pay anything to heal me.

I watched as the old man did his thing. He guided his hands over me. As he did, his body began to glow, then the glow concentrated into his palms. When he touched me, a thin glow spread over my whole body. It felt like he was feeling out anything that might be wrong with me. As the energy collected, it begin to light up certain areas more than others, and it seemed to be sucking spread-out venom or other stuff into bubbles, as best as I can describe what happened. The healer would pull these bubbles outside of the body, and the bubbles flashed white and became nothing. "There!" he said, "that should take care of the spider venom and the tick bacteria. By the way, it looked like you had been bitten quite some time ago. How did you manage?" I shrugged my shoulders and sighed, "I guess I just have a rugged immune system. I ought to anyway," I said as

memories of nights on the street flooded through my mind.

As they did, I remembered something else. Come to think of it, the whole event of being bitten by rats seemed like a bad dream. I don't remember winning against those rats, and the next day, I could find no wounds. “Could you check to see if I have any old wounds? Like rat bites.” He responded almost immediately, stating that there was no sign that I had ever been bitten by rats before today. I guess whatever it was had been just a fever dream back then.

Since I had no particular deadline, I decided to do some last exploring before I left town. After buying more yak meat, I bought a pendant watch modeled after the old clockwork kind, but this one contained an AM/PM slot on the right side of the hands . The clock right now read «11:38 AM.» I had missed being able to tell the time.

We started the day at sunrise, calling about 6 AM “sunrise” and everything until sunset, the “first hour” up to the “eleventh hour,” so the eleventh hour was 5 PM, and then we said sunset. Despite summer or winter, the time of sunrise and sunset was always the same. All time after the sun sets is called Void Time, because it was traditionally not measured at all. This was set up during a time when guards had to be constantly vigilant for night invaders. But nobody uses this system of time nowadays, except for priests and the guard. Now everyone uses AM/PM time. I also bought a calendar and a cellphone.

The calendars we have do not require updating year after year. Rather than using technology, our civilization runs from alchemy (which I cannot begin to explain) and runes. When we discovered runes, we worked for decades understanding a method in which people could write on objects. Oddly, using energy and using prayers to make mystical effects was the easy part, learning to implant runes on objects, not so much. People discovered that they could write runes on paper and make interactive maps or other such things. My cellphone also ran on runes, since such devices didn't need electricity if they were simply told how to work.

There were drawbacks, particularly in mass-production, but we'll talk about that later, I suppose. This calendar was actually a single piece of paper. It showed today's date by default, but people could also ask it, “What day does (this holiday) start?” or “Can I see the calendar for (that) month?” and the paper would change in response to this.

The months and days of the week were different from what people used to know, though. Our months were based on the Chinese zodiac, the weekdays were Fire, Water, Earth, Wood, Wind, Day of Rest, and Holy Day. The Day of Rest in particular was an interesting day, as no thaumaturgy but that used to save the lives of others would work. Today's date, for instance, was Earth, the 5th day of the Dragon month in the year 7078 AD, and it was summer.

Now that I had shopped for everything I wanted, I went to the bank. “One bank account, please.” The woman there had blue hair of a far deeper blue than mine and was dressed like a maid, while standing near a large red chest and never looking up. “Welcome to the Red Chest bank. Do you have any identification?” I shrugged, “I don't. Can you make one?” She continued to look down as she was writing upon a single sheet of paper attached to a clipboard, creating a sort of makeshift laptop. The paper crunched numbers which shrunk down and shifted into a single rune once totaled. At last she acknowledged my presence. “Sure, that's fine. Let me finish this.” And back she went to crunching numbers.

After an hour, she pulled out a blank ID card made from thin metal (probably sorcerer's alloy), and what appeared to be a kid's magic wand. It was a small bit of wood with a bit of cheap rock carved into a crude star at the end. After asking me a few questions, she told me not to smile, said a few words under her breath, and pointed it at me. I got blinded for a few seconds with a flash of light. When I could see again, my card was done. «**Name:** Ambrosia Brahman. **Address:** The Street, Opening Town. **Age:** Probably 21. **Hair:** Blue. **Eyes:** Blue. **Height:** 5'8”. **Weight:** 139 lb. **Identification:** 17A6B95F.» She told me that my information would automatically update, and gave me a purse to carry my stuff. It had the Red Chest design on it for advertising, so yeah, not entirely about charity. She quickly created an ATM card and asked me to input a four-digit number, then pushed the card into the chest by her side. I stuffed the card into the

slot, and then said my birth date . Adding most of my Gold, I turned around and walked in the other direction. The only thing I hadn't managed to buy was a decent knife. It was finally time to go.

I arrived at the gate to town. Opening town, along with all the other very strange things about it, had only one exit. The south entrance had a line that moved slowly. I saw all of the men and women and animals heading out. The two guards, a man and a woman wearing shiny red armor and a silver sword, stood as fearsome reminder that this town sucked. Every now and then, a person would try to sneak by without paying, and the female soldier would casually cut them apart with the sword. As I came close enough to hear, the soldier said to a person ahead of me, “That will be 350 Gold.” I realized that all of my banking and spending, I was now 108 Gold short. If I didn't get out of the line, I too would be turned to ribbons. I tried to back out, but people behind me grabbed me and shoved me back in line, crying, “No cutting!”

CHAPTER 2

In which Ambrosia meets Nevras, Elias, and Aqorm, and receives her quest.

NEVRAS

Herein lies my personal journal, which I have decided to share with some, but not Ambrosia, because it's embarrassing. I'm not sure how she would feel knowing that she is a character in this story. I would entreat all of those reading also not to share a word to those inside the royal castes. After all, there is some material within these pages that would compromise my position. You understand, don't you?

Ostensibly, I am Nevras Fitzembor, a common soldier within the army of Phoenix, and currently a mercenary. However, my real name is Crown Prince Nevrasia Astra Danger Fitz Embor Phoenix III. Yes, Danger is my middle name, but we will never mention this again.

I have made it known that while any children I have may be eligible for succession, I have no desire to rule. Frankly, the secrets I hide would be better kept if my parents were allowed to either rule in my place, or to appoint a regent. Phoenix is not patrilineal succession, but rather it would be fairer to say that it's a mix of several systems. Phoenix believes firmly in the Mandate of Heaven, which means when those of the royal bloodline misrule or refuse the position, someone else is chosen. Usually close relatives are given the crown, but because it is more important that a willing and suitable ruler be in office, regular citizens have on occasion become king or queen. My grandfather was direct line of Phoenix so he had the throne, but my mother rather than her husband was granted a coronation. This makes my dad a prince consort. Not that he minds this job.

At around age 15, I told my parents that they could rule in my stead until I had made a decision regarding the crown, and I basically left. My sisters weren't much better; after having become thoroughly sick of being waited upon hand and foot, they decided to renounce all titles. Between my twelve sisters, most became maids, hunters and fishers, or farmers in service of our castle; two others became townspeople, and one decided to travel along with a Miroku Buddhist. If people ask them though, they will deny that they were ever in line for the throne. My siblings look fairly different from myself, between dye jobs and rune-based reconstructive surgery.

The prospect of filling out paperwork all day and having no real power does not seem very appealing to any of us. Since Phoenix is a small area, our power counts for very little. This is not to say that I or my sisters would have changed our minds about ruling if we ruled more land.

Phoenix is an archipelago, a group of three closely knit islands that form an inverted triangle. There are wetlands near their coasts, giving way in places to hardwood forests, and gradually become much more mountainous near the town of Phoenix. The entire eastern edge of the western island and the northwestern tip of the eastern island end in a steep cliff, while the southern island is a lowlands. The entire group of islands receives record amounts of rain due to its coastal weather patterns. The town of Phoenix is a mountain village across the sea from the town of Opening; there is very little for us to

“rule” over in such a backwater place. We just review largely pointless laws, only to conclude there is no need for them.

On the other hand, Phoenix is invested in the Council, and its decisions matter there. But any discussion of leadership is largely academic, since by Council law, any kingdom is not allowed to rule over more than one town. Our position is more like that of a mayor.

Centuries ago, the leaders of the State divided the nations entirely into ten regions. These largely unelected folk were quick to become dictators with no checks and balances to answer to, all while pretending to be peacekeeping force. They gave grand-sounding mission statements, but ultimately it was about control of the population. Why, they even once tried to lock everyone indoors because of a virus! *WHO* would *do* such a thing...

GOD

The Conditioned Opinion Viral Immunodeficiency of 2019 (also known as the Phantom Virus), was a psychological warfare exercise. This was at a time when the State tried to reign over all, yet human beings were about to awaken spiritually. So they engineered a fear program. They convinced everyone that a deadly disease was going around, and that everyone must do their part to be safe. As if safety kept one from death.

I think it would be better to explain it as a mass reverse-placebo. Subjects were continually fed bogus statistics about cases or deaths, there were constant mentions of symptoms, and people were constantly exposed to masks and gloves (since people were told to wear them). People weren't going outside to verify whether actual illness existed, leading to a Plato's Cave situation where information was distorted. They were being fed a steady diet of unbelief. And the temples were closed, so people weren't able to feel connected or positive without significant effort. It was like a cult took over.

People were told they couldn't enter businesses without a mask, even if they were hard to get. Even if they had allergies or religious objections, even if they were so poor and hungry that they needed help, they were turned away at the gate. And the businesses themselves had to say this or be told they weren't being “safe enough.” It was a sick situation where the business didn't want to turn away customers, but were forced to in order to please people who never had any interest in their company, while annoying customers who would potentially boycott them in response. It was no-win and many stores closed, to say nothing of the massive crisis to all temples. There was loss of religious freedom, mass unemployment, forced vaccinations, scanning people to see if they were vaccinated, curfews, and there was also trillions in private bailouts because society didn't let the economy just figure out how it would work on its own.

I knew there was never any virus to begin with. This experiment was a Pavlovian exercise to induce “symptoms” similar to how stress hives developed. Inside the prescribed radius from others, people were sure they would become sick, so they did. These things were only as real as the fear itself, whether of the so-called disease or something else. Like the Salem Witch Trials before it, this was a mass hysteria.

It was only once people let go of their fears and tried to overcome them that they understood the Regaining Companionship sutra. This was one of the Miroku Buddha's teachings, not to fear those who could destroy the body, but to remember their soul instead. Then they regained companionship with me, and began to invite their friends back in their houses. Whenever humans spend time with others, they show love to me.

NEVRAS

Huh, I feel like my train of thought was interrupted for a second there... Anyway, after they were finally overthrown, the remaining nations took stock of all that had happened, and realized government was most effective when it stayed to its own affairs. And so, the Anti-Government Council was formed in the New Earth. They were a sort of constitutional anarchy, quite paradoxically; a world government dedicated to preventing the formation of world governments. The Council prevented towns from gobbling up each other towns and becoming empires. The Council made laws against certain taxes (with income/property taxes prohibited, some leaders got very creative) and the use of military for anything but self-defense. The Council weren't completely a nuisance though, since they did facilitate overseas trade and helped countries develop goods and services. As a kingdom, we weren't *that* rich, but we managed to avoid making our

citizens grumpy by producing our own food with subsistence farming and by hunting. Since we were a series of islands, fishing was not a problem either. We got most of our money from exports and from... well, I'll discuss that later. The citizens in turn treated us well, showing us to nice restaurants and other entertainment, and getting some of their money back. Still, I despised the Council, as I despise most hypocrites.

I eventually joined a mercenary service. I adopted common speech to hide my noble origins, and used only what money I could carry. Fighting creatures gave me pride which I had not possessed as nobility, for I learned to work with my hands rather than rely on connections. And so it was that my journey led me to Opening. The town is just as I last saw it, when I visited to collect on my bounty. By that, of course, I mean a shithole. I watched as the guards killed a woman for failing to pay their toll, and I continued as I saw a girl with fern blue (I know my colors, but I'm not gay or anything) hair was getting pushed directly into the crowd. Finally, I had seen enough.

Perhaps I look a bit too much like some stock blond spiky-haired characters of heroic legend. It is as if someone modeled these heroes after me, then decided to make me much different from what is expected of a real hero. But I'd rather not talk about that.

I pulled out my katana, silently stepped closer, and swung at the guard with a wide sweeping arc of the sword while his back was turned. The crowd scattered as this scuffle started, not wanting to get hurt, despite not minding these guards cutting people up apparently. As I had found while hunting bears and other furry animals, it was extremely effective against flesh and muscle. However, the lamellar armor did its job of keeping out shallow swings. I had been in the army, as mentioned before... but, to be completely honest, I was a mere scout. They trained me to use a sword, but my light body lacked the driving power to deal with heavy infantry. The guards turned around, and the male one said, “Halt! Who goes there?” I taunted the male guard and got him to chase after me. The female guard tried to chase after me as well, but she was too close to the gate entrance, and had to slow down to avoid crashing into the gate. As the soldier raised his weapon at me, I blocked with my sword and pirouetted to the right as if I were going to flank the guard from that side, but it was a fake. I dove under his legs instead, and drew my sword before he could react, using the Speed Slash technique.

Unlike thaumaturgy, techniques don't use mystic power. Yes, this is even true of those guys that can generate lightning by swinging their weapons around. Show offs. My technique was nothing much, I just rushed forward at high speed, and slashed a few times. It was the sort of technique that a person could use to slash an apple several times in midair, like in all the movies. Oddly enough, though, it was called Speed Slash and not Speed Slashes because the average person only saw the sword get swung once and return to the wielder's side. The slashes cut the straps connecting portions of the armor. The breastplate portion of his armor slid off, and I used the remaining slices to take him down. The female guard was a bigger problem, she had finally caught up, and she seemed the more vicious of the two from what I noticed. I also generally had more reservations about horribly mangling her body, like I did with this guy. People tend to die when they are killed, after all. It's unsightly. Given this, I played a defensive combat game, hoping to study her form, and wear her down. With any luck, I could disarm her and knock her out. It was dangerous enough though, she definitely had more arm strength than me, even given her small size. One cut to the wrong area would be the end of me. I weaved left, I ducked right, and I backed up as she slashed across. I was just about to dodge her next attack, when I slipped on an uneven mound of dirt. It had rained yesterday and some of the ground had sunk from foot traffic. This was not supposed to be the day that I got impaled or beheaded. I was supposed to be the brave hero, who saves the girl. Wasn't I?

AMBROSIA

For the record, I am not a conventional fighter. I learned to fight from defending my territory against rats with a fishing pole, and I learned to fish from many times where it mattered that I... stay fed. I am really quite good at getting a meal this way most days. Of course, anything close to a pond in town has basically no fish, because it's called a large puddle. I am neither particularly fast, any more than another person, nor strong, nor

anything much else. If a story were made of me, I clearly wouldn't be the lead. I know how to use my basic skills to fight, though. I guess that's something. I can sew, fish, chop wood, cook, and put on a corsets and other fine clothes (thanks to my somewhat upper-middle class adopted parents).

It was just me, the girl, and the guards. Then, this beautiful girl managed to take out the male guard, only to be forced to weave in and out of attacks. Her movements were as flexible as a dancer (I had no idea at the time that I was actually watching a grown man, so convincing was his femininity). Since her back was now completely turned to me, I cast my fishing pole fly-fish style, I managed to hook the cord around the woman's shoulder, and then twirled it until it also tangled around her other shoulder and looped tightly near her chest. I had caught marlins before, so I wasn't a weakling. I yanked hard, pulling her closer to me and farther from this other girl. She had tried to cut it, but I jerked hard enough and fast enough that the sword flew out of her hand. Unfortunately, it managed to graze the knee of the girl who was trying to help me, and she had to sit this one out while she performed first aid. Now that she was close enough for me to do so, and before she stood up, I decided to run in a circle around her, still holding the pole. "Gotcha suckers!" I screamed. Using the fact that she was restrained to my advantage, I jumped on her back before she got a chance to move toward her weapon.

We wrestled in the dirt for quite a while. She managed to move on top of me and free her arms in the process of struggling, and then held my shoulder down while she wrapped her legs around mine, just below the knee. She basically had her knees folded almost in a triangle with her knee near my hips, and her arms apparently making ready to choke me, if she could manage to loosen her arms and shoulders enough to move them closer. Only, I was sitting on the fishing pole, so that wasn't happening. I tugged slightly, and the coiled line around her pulled her arms away from me. On the other hand, I had my hands mostly free, having only the misfortune of being tied at the waist to her by fishing line, and her legs around my lower body. I pivoted slightly to the right, as much as I could anyway with our bodies locked and reached for the strap of her outfit. Given that I knew all about complicated female outfits, having seen everything from zipper to lace-up fastening for clothing, it was a simple matter to find where the parts to her two-piece breastplate and skirt armor undid, being careful to slide them under the fishing line, managed to leave her completely in her underwear, except for a red leather helmet that left a bit of green hair peeking through.

For someone so brutal, she wore surprisingly girlish lingerie, bearing a lacy set of pink brassiere and panties. As she became exposed, her earlier bravery was replaced with something more akin to a submissive personality. She dropped all antagonism, so I punched her in the stomach. Since we were tied to each other, my actions pulled me on top of her. I loosened my bonds (including her leg) and tried to stand up. This turned out to be easier said than done, since the moment I stood, she suddenly became very clingy, pulling me halfway down and kissing my lips with a sort of hunger. I didn't really kiss back. It's not that I'm asexual. Like I said, I can't feel very strongly, so I tend not to get very attached emotionally. Right now, I knew exactly the appropriate response when someone I barely knew lusted after me and wanted to give me sweet sweet loving. It was of course to kick them with the heel of my foot. Repeatedly. Oddly, enough, she started moaning, and when I tried walk away, cried "Don't stop! I want more..." I agreed, "Okay, but only on the condition that you guards stop bothering people. There must be another way than this!" After thinking a moment, she concluded, "Honestly, most of the guards were thinking they could probably still make the tax money by moonlighting as prostitutes." Yep, I still hate this town. I kept my end of the bargain and continued to kick her while she proceeded to kiss my leg. Finally, the bruises were enough for her and she was exhausted.

I looked at my rescuer. She was tall and slim with nice hips, and had a healthy mane of short spiky blond hair which I had a strong urge to tousle. It wasn't until she spoke that I noticed her distinct lack of breasts, and heard her too deep voice. Heaven and Earth, but he was gorgeous. He asked me, "Are you all right?"

Someone this pretty wouldn't respect a downer girl like me. I had to lie, and fast. Putting on my best fake happy smile, I said, "Why wouldn't I be okay?" To answer, he

pointed at my fallen rival. “Oh alright, so I have a few issues. So sue me. And you still haven't told me your name. Who are you?”

GOD

I just thought I'd break the story a little bit, to talk about something important. I know some of you are worried that I basically moved the topic away from what happens next. This is a literary device, known as suspense. We take the action away from the main character so you have time to wonder, “What happens next?” Don't worry, I shall not take too much of your time.

Today, we will talk about death. I know that you saw the dashing man Nevras kill someone in full view of everyone, and are worried if your children should be reading this book. Especially with some of the sexual references. Granted, it was probably in the Adult section of your local library. But still! I know they sometimes check out books above their reading level.

You mustn't be concerned. Death is a natural part of life, and even though murder is definitely not natural, nor what I intended them to do, there is less worry over mortality in this world. For not only are priests able to raise the dead, but even if they don't... it'll be okay. Unlike in Earth, death does not operate with the same intensity on the New Earth. Lives are still quite sacred, to be clear, so abortion or murder are frowned upon. But I will generally forgive such things, provided one feels real sorrow for having killed another life.

There is another reason. Remember how I said all those historical events happened? Oh wait, I haven’t talked about this yet. You silly humans and your “time” thing. Well anyway, it turns out that I changed my mind. What *really* happened was around this time was that I was changing reality. I gave them Grace from Jesus, after the Law failed. Before that, I was the God of the universe and solely in control, but now I shared my power and I made them co-creators. I proposed the idea of *seinaru-ishi* (thaumaturgy) and *kiseki* (miracles). And yet, I told nobody about this until after the New Earth. This meant that most people did not understand how to be saved. I showed them with the resurrection that they no longer needed to fear death. Yet they kept expecting that one day, my Son would come again. And they made up stories about the second coming, and how the wicked would be damned. Who just so happened to be the same sort of sinners that I forgave on the cross?

Eventually, the Earth did get destroyed anyway. When I remade the Earth, I decided to improve it, as people believed what John of Patmos had written, “And I saw a New Heaven and a New Earth, for the first Heaven and the first Earth were passed away; and there was no more sea. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes...” That wasn't my plan (he kinda made false prophecy), but I went along with that part. But immediately, fishermen complained that they had no work. And people who were bored wanted death and pain to remain. As I wasn't sure how to proceed, I brought humans up to my design room and had them argue. This is how I came up with the idea of the Great Revision, then I went back in time in the original Earth to test it out. It began with the Mandela Effect. It was obvious why I wanted to undo Nelson Mandela’s death in prison, but changing Jiffy to Jif peanut butter or rewriting Vader’s line in *Star Wars* were less obvious. Satan even helped with some of these, though the quality was lacking. I mean, c’mon, why would C-3PO have a silver leg or Curious George not have a tail? And the line in *Pokemon* should be “no worries” not “no need to worry.” These were all part of a plan to teach humans how to rewrite reality to avoid unwanted futures. Eventually, humans discovered the power of the Soulfire, the ability to reshape reality. This was the first of many types of magic, at least since ancient times.

I gave them back the sea, but it was such that anyone could breathe underwater if they had strong will. And I gave them death, but it was such that spiritually people could choose how fast they aged, and when they wanted to die. But I also gave all people the ability to *remember* that there was an Afterlife. This even included atheists, though they had to do some mental gymnastics usually involving denying reality itself. The sting of death was taken away, for all could remember that death was not to be feared.

All of them, except for Ambrosia. She was born without a memory of most of her

life, and being afraid of her own death. Why did she not remember, you ask? You forget, suspense is important, dearest reader. I shall not tell you right now. Yet, I made a promise. If ever her story ended before she completed her task as Oracle, I had made the decision to use a prayer. I would recite the words, ***Reset*** and her entire group would be taken back to the nearest safe place. From there she was able to make a different decision, and change her fate. They weren't supposed to remember this reset, but sometimes they did anyway.

You ask, but what happens to atheists or people who don't believe in an Afterlife? Well, my dear readers, this will require some backstory. In fact, let's go all the way back to the Beginning. They ask, "What created God?" I can say with all certainty that I created me. I had come into being, as a result of looped reality. That is, a later me wanted me to exist, so that version of me created the earlier me. Likewise, creation cannot happen *ex nihilo*, everything is a transformation of my eternal body. For eternity before everything was created, before there was such a thing as time, I was Yin and Yang. I alone was Existence in the universe, in a swirling mass of Void nearby. Void can be thought as an absence in the universe, but it isn't actually nothing, because something must exist to cause things to break down into entropy. While powerful wonder-workers can summon the Void as offensive or utility effects, it is safe to say that unlike matter, Void is not really "created." It is least confusing to refer to this as unmade matter, where matter needs to be created.

And there was nothing but Void here, aside from me. And then, tired of nothing happening forever, I spoke the words, "**我可以有光** " and there was Light (many people think because I am God of the Hebrews, that I spoke these words in Hebrew, but that is incorrect; Unified Japanese is the true language of the universe, along with computer code). From that moment on, the Reapers existed as personifications of the Void. They were beings that handled the underpinnings of reality. Think of them like you would the backstage crew of a set. I created things, but they built the runes that allowed things to sustain themselves. When hooded, they looked like the typical grim reaper, and their hood somehow completely covered their face, but actually all of these but one were women, and rather attractive for beings that would never get lucky, ever, since they weren't created to reproduce. Unlike the classic Grim Reaper, each had a different color robe. There were seven of them**:** Rinne was the Reaper of the Afterlife; Seishi was the Reaper of Birth; Yomi was the Reaper of Death, the Grim Reaper; Chiku was the Reaper of Nature, Engaku was the Reaper of Physics, Jin had authority over Free Will; and finally, Bosatsu, as the one male in the group governed the Unseen World. The Unseen World was the world where the Reapers (and their human employees, the Pales) lived.

The typical soldier for a town guard is chosen for his lack of belief in the supernatural, which grants them powerful antimagic to defend against those who might think to use thaumaturgy against them. This decision wasn't without drawbacks, as they were unable to see most ghosts and had difficulty using magical items. While indirect magic like enchantments or illusions might still work, any time an atheist was aware of active magic within about five feet of them, they would nullify it. When an atheist died, rather than experiencing a self-created Afterlife, they directly saw the Unseen World.

Typically, a Reaper would approach them and ask them how they wanted their body disposed of. Every now and then, the Reaper of the Unseen World would ask a person if they wanted to become a Pale, a human servant of a Reaper. Unlike Reapers, who could only be seen by mortals if they were dead or if they touched them, the Pales were capable of being seen by humans. But they usually didn't know what they were seeing. A human that saw a Pale would instead see a crow or raven eating the body, or fungus making things fertile, or a midwife delivering a baby.

That's what happened here. The dead soldier's world fell away, replaced by a sepia world that mirrored ours. While the world itself lacked color, there were connecting strands webbed across everything, extending from specific points where people were born, dying, etc. Suddenly the gate of the town was as crowded as it had been before. And then he saw the source of these strands. There were seven tall beings in hoods, waiting for him to make some sort of decision. "Do you want to die?" they asked.

After thinking for a second, he replied, "I thought I am dead already." They chuckled

like those who had heard a joke many times before, yet still found it mildly amusing. The one in black, Yomi, responded with a sigh, “Your body was killed, but you do get to choose. We can reincarnate you. We can destroy you and turn you into energy. We can let you wander as a ghost.” The one known as Bosatsu stepped towards him. “You are a warrior,” he said, “for long I have watched you defend this land. Would you like to continue in your duty? Would you like to become a Pale?” The soldier considered for a second, and then answered, “No. I want to create a barrier to screen out all those who would harm the people of this land, be they humans or animals.” Chiku, the Reaper of Nature, stabbed him with her scythe, and his body turned into runes. Whenever someone tried to enter who had evil will, vines would spring up and block the entrance. So you see, dear reader, this is why you should not spend too long mourning this man.

NEVRAS

“My name is... ummm, Nevras Fitzembor. That's it, yes. I am clearly a regular mercenary and not anything else,” I said, even though it was blatantly obvious that I was lying. For some reason, she just stared at me, not caring particularly that I was hiding something. It was pretty clear that she liked my looks from her blush.

As I am well aware, I lack many of the male secondary sex characteristics while I have many uncharacteristically female traits, short of actual breasts. I had myself tested at a young age by our court alchemists, and ultimately they concluded that, yes, I was a fertile male, but I had difficulty using some of the testosterone for development. Even at an old age, I would not be able to grow a beard and would have smaller than normal muscles for the amount of strength I should have.

It used to be that doctors and scientists told people they couldn’t be fertile, but some of that was to give them an excuse to cut away and make everyone look “normal” by their standards. Then the Great Intersex Revolt happened, and people closely examined these people and the unnecessary surgeries they were given. This event came about because less and less men were born conventionally masculine. Men began to stop building muscle mass as a result of wars taking the biggest and strongest, and even the growth of beards became somewhat rare, with only about a quarter of the male population able to grow facial hair. It was like on a very spiritual level, men stopped caring about being men and instead wanted to be more like women.

People like me used to be considered sterile, but then people with far more extreme conditions managed to do so. It did mean that I was more likely to have daughters than sons, though, if I ever had children. I was just a very soft-looking guy, who could pass easily for either gender. I had small hands, no Adam’s apple, and broad hips, yet down below I was not female. A little padded armor and suddenly I looked a lot more manly; on the other hand, I was certain that I could with only a small amount of effort pass equally easily for a girl. Not that I'd ever tried, right?

The girl decided it was her turn to speak. “My name is Brahman. Ambrosia Brahman. I owe you my life. Thank you!” She paused as if considering something very weighty to say, and then just spat it out, “Could you help me? I have one of **those** quests to carry out, and it would be tedious without a cute male companion to join me.” I immediately blurted out, “Sounds cool!” And indeed it did. Over the course of the next hour and a half as we walked toward her destination, she discussed her experiences, being extremely secretive about certain details. I felt inspired to help her out. There was something about her that made me think even someone like me would be accepted without a second thought.

We exited the town. Now, things might seem strange to those of the 20th and 21st centuries, but there is very little in the way of running water or underwater pipes, no roads to speak of, few bridges or dams. Alchemy has made things like cement and advanced metallurgy possible, so within towns, even without any magic, there was running water and the latest conveniences. So why are there only well-trod paths and no formal roads? It's because towns stop at the outskirts, since government doesn't usually have authority out there.

The landscape passed by. We passed through thickets and worn dirt, noticing the huge tree in the background near an even more ponderous mountain. At long last, I could see

the outskirts of the town. The sign read, «The Town of Shoten. This town is famous for the Sage Delphi. Only women are permitted inside the temple!» Oh crap. Ambrosia decided to try anyway. She went directly to the entrance to the temple, and demanded they let her in. They would not even agree to simply let her enter without me, electing instead to give us both a sharp poke in the stomach, knock us prone, and insist that we leave. It was only after we rose from the gravel that we noticed a blond girl in pigtails waving us over.

AQORM

As a proud resident of the town of Shoten, permit me to be your guide. You, the people on the other side. I see you looking. And as a dodecacentenarian , my perspective is somewhat beyond human standards, which probably why I know about you guys reading this. Even though I have read thousands of books, everything from advanced philosophy, engineering, agriculture, and economics, to musical theory and poetry, it feels like showing off my knowledge would make me a center of attention. My true age is 2018 years, but it suits my purposes better to pretend to be only 18 years old; I pretend to be a carefree half-elf who knows nothing about the Earth's sad history, and who plays childish pranks on people.

While many people think being a half-elf only entails elf and human pairing, some half-elves are half-demon, and so on. Elves come in several shapes and sizes, but all have night vision and superior senses, and a racial affinity for geomancy. There are the high elves, those with advanced magic in addition to geomancy. While geomancy granted elves a power that drew power directly from the type of land the user was standing on, high elves used also thaumaturgy of other races; however, unlike other races they were able to use them without expending mystic power due to their natural connection with the land. There's also the wood elf, who were strong and fast, and able to navigate the woodlands easily without losing speed. Other elves, such as the drow and aquatic elf, were less commonly seen. The drow lived deep under the earth with another race known as hill elves, and the aquatic elves could breathe underwater and were similarly away from sight.

There are even some “half-elves” who are two different breeds of elf. I won't bore you with the technicalities, but elves do not consider each other the same race. It has something to do with their racial superiority complex, each elf believes its race to be the ideal of elfhood. I am a “half-elf” in that I was a flawed blend of wood elf and aquatic elf. My parents were all elf, and looked as young as a teenager, while I was beginning to look older than them. While all elf, the mixed blood in my body meant my body wasn't fully adapted to life as either elf race, so I would eventually die. My father was a aquatic elf who left for the surface after becoming bored with life below. My mother was a wood elf who met him on the job. Oh right, I should mention about her occupation, but perhaps let's save that for later. What happened now is important, because the events today changed my life.

Half-elves by the way, even those like me, could easily be identified as such. I had long ears like other elves, but any purebred elf would be readily distinguishable by the shorter height and extra digit on each hand or foot. That's right, real elves have only four fingers and four toes, not five. As such, even though my parents wanted to teach me about elf culture, they couldn't. I was considered a mortal, and I would gradually age.

I had left my family to pursue my dreams, since they could never understand me. After arriving in the town of Shoten, I took in the sights. It was a rather small town, with a smattering of shops and other buildings, surrounding a large two-story temple in the center with a set of stained glass windows. The second floor was mostly just a staircase to the bell tower, which rang once per daylight hour. Most of the houses in town had stone frame and wood roof structure, including the temple. This was done as a specific building quirk, and it seemed to be popular, as other towns copied this design. As it was, I owned the only building made entirely out of wood, and it honestly wasn't much of a house. The outside of the place was just as big a wreck. It was a log cabin with the facade of roof, with nothing but cardboard roofing behind it. In fact, it was of such poor quality that a kid threw a rock at it, and it made a hole. The masons, used as they were to

repairing stone buildings, simple placed a paper sign on the area, «Repairing the hole in the ceiling. Be back later! -Department of Public Works.» They were *never* back. We have a leak even today.

As bad as this building was, it put me at a good vantage point to see most of the major events of town. I saw the "women" who walked the streets of this town. There was an inordinate amount of female impersonators aged from childhood to well into old age. Not that everyone was male, but the fact that there was somewhere men couldn't enter created a situation where some of them were tempted to don wigs and makeup. It was especially the case when Delphi, the woman inside the temple, was said to have prophetic abilities.

It was at this time when I saw two people head to the gates of the temple who definitely weren't from this town. I decided to help them after watching them walk right towards the gate guarded by two shapely women. The guards only said, "There is a man with you! You shall not pass!" before bludgeoning them with a mithril quarterstaff in the stomach, knocking them back and causing them to groan as though suffering from indigestion. I also decided I would not tell them about the back entrance. The boy looked entirely too sexy for this opportunity to go to waste. I didn't dare steal him away from the girl he seemed to be traveling with, but I did want to see how cute he could look. I was wary though, as this woman looked more than slightly emotionally disturbed. Granted she outwardly seemed calm, but I had seen women like her before. If ever she did become his boyfriend, she was the type to remember that I had done and do terrible things to me.

There is something you should know about these guards. They are aware that many of the visitors are in drag. They only keep out those who do not do a decent job of it. In fact, the town has cut a deal with me. My housing is free, plus a small stipend, so long as I aid and assist those who wish to enter. My house is small, but since elves and half-elves don't really need to sleep, there is only a small vanity table with a mirror and cosmetics. We had a few costumes hanging on a hook too, but most people prefer to get their own clothes. Provided they brought other supplies, I would help them make the look passable. I had transformed obvious men with plenty of facial stubble, broad torso, and square jaw into dainty ladies with soft faces, long eyelashes, and good curves. Having a better subject to work with was definitely preferable though.

"Hey!" I called out to the hapless targets of abuse. "You look like you need help." The girl had a strange expression on her face. She had just been beaten up, but for quite a few seconds, her face showed no response at all. Then, with effort, she managed to look peeved. Still, her voice had no note of emotion even while she acted angry, "Those guards beat us up. The nerve!" She continued, still trying to sound more upset than she apparently felt, "I don't know what to do! If we can't get in, I won't be able to complete my quest."

It was extremely odd. As she explained her mission from God and her past, I definitely got the sense that it *should* be important. Yet somehow, as my elf senses were quick to point out, there was a definite note that there was something missing. Possessive clinginess to her man notwithstanding, she didn't give vibes of a sociopath or psychopath, her emotions weren't fake, she simply was trying to hide the fact that she seemed to be unable to care about anything. It occurred to me that someone who had a quest but no passion would quit midway, and become bored or depressed at the slightest setback. Somehow watching this girl try to be passionate about the idea of being passionate was starting to affect me. I wanted to follow her. I wanted to make sure she never failed in her quest. Suddenly, it was about something more than just helping her guy carry out a scam.

I had to phrase this carefully, or these two would never agree. I decided to act as if I had just thought of this idea, and not been doing this so often that at least one-third of the population had already gone along with this plan. "What if... You could dress up a girl, maybe?" I'd expected him to put up some resistance, but it was a refusal followed by, "Okay, I guess so," when Ambrosia told him it would be fun. From there, since he was reluctant to head to the store and buy clothes, I convinced him to instead fight one of the "women," omitting certain relevant facts. Of course it was legal to be attacking random citizens for their clothing, because I had given them this clothing after all. The target for

attack immediately tried to confess “her” feelings to him, until Nevras attacked with the flat of his sword. Aside from my geomancy, I also had years of experience picking pockets. I had originally planned to be a pianist. Busking with a grand piano was more difficult than I had expected though, because of hauling it around. Until I managed to make money as a makeup artist, I learned the art of theft to make ends meet. While the target was distracted, I removed their clothes, much to the shock and embarrassment of Nevras and Ambrosia as the victim, I mean target, attempted to cover his nudity. I directed Nevras to my house before he asked the awkward question of why a woman we had undressed suddenly turned out to be male.

Inside my house, I showed Nevras to the vanity table, and told him to undress. Ambrosia waited outside. He stripped down, taking off a blue shirt and pants, which it turned out were actually a type of padded armor. His body was actually much smaller under this. He took off his boxer briefs, and suddenly I understood why. He likely had what was known as Partial Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome. He had no breasts, but his small equipment, generally low amount of body hair, and feminine features were proof enough. I noticed right away when he put on the bra and panties that he understood about tucking. He had definitely done this before. I got the sense perhaps that Ambrosia hadn't figured it out that Nevras was into this sort of thing yet. I fished around through the other stuff I had handy, and found some false breasts. Centuries of alchemy combined with a high level of advances in runes had created materials that were waterproof, didn't leak or tear, and blended so completely to the skin that it was impossible to notice. When it was time to remove, they would slip off with a touch, and yet one could exercise, swim underwater, or bounce up and down on a bed and not have them detach. They even felt real! While Nevras could walk around without a bra and still not be suspected, it wouldn't do to have jiggling everywhere. I zipped him up in a medium-length blue dress, and he slipped on some matching heels. I put on some makeup on him, adding some foundation, concealer, powder, and blush, then added a touch of lipstick. His eyebrows were good, so I wound up doing a minimum amount of work there. Come to think of it, his makeup was far more natural looking than most of my other subjects. I added a wig in a similar color to his hair, pinning his own hair in a cap. Finally, I opened the door to show him off to Ambrosia.

AMBROSIA

Wow.

NEVRAS

For the next few minutes, Ambrosia stared at me like a horny teenager. I doubted she could articulate anything going on in her head besides a strong desire to jump my bones. I knew she was attracted to me but somehow being made up like this seemed to turn her on more than some conventionally manly guy would.

After a few seconds of something similar to shock, she whipped out her phone and started taking pictures. Her phone started printing off photos, and before I could grab away the phone (and possibly smash it) she ran off. Ambrosia returned with a big stash of money, obviously claimed by selling pictures to random people.

We stood at the gate to the temple. The guards now said, “Good, it looks like you're all female! I'll let you folks in.” And with that, they stood aside and unlocked the doors.

Inside the temple doors, the stone walls of the temple and high windows blocked all but faint light. The stained glass from the back and side windows cast faint images of strange prophecy, with three windows in the back and six on each side. The back three windows had a single event, depicting of a woman pointing to a man's apparent mother and father, the same man leaving those and going to slay his real father, and... “Oedipus,” I murmured. There were many other pictures, from prophecies of war to rise and fall of kings, and even one that had a series of silver spears which had a plaque below that read, «with silver spears, you will conquer the world.» I have little knowledge about these ones though, so I ignored them and continued to look around.

Priestesses moved about, performing all sorts of tasks such as cleaning the temple, helping to interview candidates for whether they were good candidates for her prophetic powers, or ushering them out if they had silly questions concerning weather or the like.

Those who were accepted were asked to bring gifts to the Oracle, and they were given laurel leaves to carry around in preparation for seeing her. At the very back of the temple sat a woman in a long white dress sitting in front of a crystal ball. Yes, seriously, like a cliche fortuneteller, except for the fact that her outfit resembled a bride more than a soothsayer. Behind her was a wall of red curtain aside from a small archway. I couldn't see what was in the archway yet because it was too dark and I was too far away. Somehow or other, Ambrosia found a bag of coins on the floor. The bag immediately broke when she lifted it, though.

I'm getting ahead of myself though, as I hadn't even made it halfway down the hall. Ahead of me was a young man with short-cropped silver hair. His outfit was quite different from the others in the temple, wearing black and white cloak. He had the general look of a well-educated scholar, and he was looking directly at us. I immediately realized that he was probably blocking the way. Also, how'd he get in?

This man talked in depth about history, from the original Earth to our New Earth. He told us why the lessons of history proved that the Oracle must fight him to prove her worth.

GOD

While Elias believes he knows the history of the world, he forgot some points, mainly Earth's religious history. It is my job to explain this, since I am the Author of all things, and I know way more than any pitiful mortal. And yet even so, this may not be completely accurate. I don't really keep track of history very well.

The religions we have today are not like the ones of the past Earth. Long ago, the Earth was consumed by evil. Before we go on, let me straighten things out. The old Earth was actually the third iteration of Earth, so when people talk about Jesus coming again, well he had already come well before the Romans and such even existed and when Earth's continents were all Pangaea. The Earth had original religions in the Ancient Earth, lacked them in the Middle Earth, and they were retaught to humanity in the Earth most people know about.

As for which religion was right, I had already said, “Look, people, I don't care what religion you personally adhere to. Just love each other and stop killing each other.” Apparently, this small request was too much of an imposition. These leaders that told other people some angel told them I gave this message, or that I had told them to found that religion. Honestly.

After one of these religions in particular started a bloody conquest that killed billions, I decided to send the archangel Gabriel to convince them that I had in fact **not** told them to do this. They tried to fight my archangel, but even their strongest weapons were brushed aside while Gabriel yawned. Then he summoned the animals.

Over the years, sacrifice animals had been pricked, prodded, had their throats slit, been burned, or even had creepy people pull their hearts out of their chests and show it to them. Among the signs and wonders performed were making all sacrifice animals become Saints. When you think of saints, many of you readers think of pious men and women who do nothing but praise me. While this image is largely true, I shall show a picture of what this *really* looks like if these come to Earth. Hundreds of thousands of animals rose up with new bodies (since their original bodies had long since rotten or been carved into food) which were impossible to hurt or restrain by objects of this world, and which ravages of time no longer affected. They aren't zombies, but no matter what I say, you readers will always think, “some sort of holy living zombies or something.” All of the animals slaughtered suddenly began mooing and clucking and oinking while walking about again. And they were *pissed* at having been sacrificed. Blowtorches, chains, machine guns, nukes, and even energy weapons did not damage one hair on their heads. And the archangel who summoned them was fast enough to dodge bullets but didn't have to, and could make things appear just by speaking about them.

When they understood that a *real* angel was telling them their religions had gone down a false path, and nothing violent they tried had any effect, they eventually agreed to disband as a group. It may seem unbelievable that humans would ever surrender to a single person, but here were creatures staring them in the face that their religions could

never explain, yet were more real even than their weapons. These religious zealots converted to a new religion to reflect this change. They named this new faith Sakun, or "stillness." Then they moved far away from others and never converted by force again.

I am always accused of being cruel, as are my followers. But I saw possible futures. In the first possible future, this religion continued to expand until they covered the whole world, bringing violence with them. The other option involved crowding all of them into the lands where they came from, then further walling them inside. These futures further branched into infinite number of paths, but no matter what happened, things were worse if I did nothing. Some paths involved them killing each other off, while others involved constant invasion attempts until other religions had enough and nuked them. This branch of reality did ***not*** need to happen. Those who live to hurt others will never be satisfied, because the happiness they *really* want is never fulfilled. I wanted better for them, even if my methods seemed heavy-handed.

Years passed. I would have thought (because I am not omniscient, unless I choose to be) that with them gone, the world would be at peace. But then, the nations of the world united under a single group known as the State. The State had no legitimacy, since no nation's people voted for them. They tried to trick and brainwash, and otherwise control citizens of these nations. But logic and reason exposed them, and their own brutality undid them. When people voted to disband them, they tried to say that the votes weren't "real." I could have seen their future, but there was no need. I knew of history, and it always ended poorly for such people. When states tried to tell people they couldn't have free government, they wound up strung up by the "democratic" lynch mob they so loved. In other cases, such groups succeeded, only to find out that in order for their despotism to stay in power, they had to keep offering perks to those that gave them consent to govern, or suddenly find themselves murdered.

In this case, they had a seemingly flawless system of control, using a number of fake events to produce a narrative that the people needed their authority because without them there would be no roads or bridges. When people realized they were capable of building their own roads and bridges and became sick of losing rights, they began to tell citizens that they needed their protection against environmental dangers, other evil religions, or to protect from plagues. When people began to dispute this, they manufactured such disasters as "proof" of this.

Yet the world did not end through disasters. In actual fact, contrary to so-called prophecies, it was never my intention to bring the world to an end at all, but these people were actively destroying it. I didn't slaughter them, because I refused to restrict free will, but I did clean up any disasters they caused, much to their irritation. Only when people like Ungorr the Untamed began to corrupt the very sanctity of life through science, only then did I let the Earth stay polluted.

You see, this Ungorr guy, he wasn't conventionally evil. He was the sort of mean jock that you'd see in pubs, but not a dictator or world leader. He was just a narcissist with too much muscle. He was also bit of a rageaholic, and would kill people who didn't see him as a specimen of physical prowess. Such people generally live sad lives under normal circumstances, the tough guy in high school often being unable to hold a job after college, the prom queen leaving him for someone of character. Such was much of his life, he had few friends, no family, and no woman loved him because he was too violent. He would have remained this way, except that the State saw him and decided that he was the best candidate for their plans.

He had powerful followers, because people made his fitness obsession into a religion and pressured people to see him as almost a god. They worshiped at a temple known as the Gold's Planet. While the State was mostly made up of scrawny bureaucrats, this man and his group of fitness goons frightened people enough that they had second thoughts about disobeying orders.

Between the State being stronger than ever, and this goofball being in charge, things were bad enough. But this whole situation had been manipulated behind the scenes by a demon named Belial. Thanks to Belial, Ungorr gained access to a meteor that gave him super strength, everlasting life, and invulnerability to all mortal weapons. Why, no prison built could hold him! He named the meteor Wormwood, after his high school. Using the

meteor, his followers experimented with the dead, resulting in zombies roaming the Earth. His followers began to become very scary, and regular people were afraid of also being subjected to their experiments. Ungorr's followers began to desire land to seize it, to take houses, and to rob people of their inheritance by force. They did this in broad daylight because they had the power now, and those who complained or defended themselves were now arrested. The Earth was a mess between the State, Ungorr, and his zombie followers, Belial, and the pervasive dark energy flooding the Earth. I sent the last Oracle of Tao to bring the world back into balance, but he failed. He learned what all Oracles learn, and I had to accomplish the job myself.

I remade this Earth, dividing it into the New Earth and the Realm of Void. However, this did not happen immediately but as a gradual process. And I broke the power of the State using a small group of plucky teenagers with powers. Their leaders of the State besides Ungorr put under arrest in order to answer for their war crimes, then those who could be executed were while the others were imprisoned. True, there were centuries of unrest as this broken empire left a political void that most people expected to be filled. And there were an awful lot of zombies roaming about. And ummmm... but let's brush over the nasty bit of history! Anyway, I sent angels to subdue Belial, but the Earth was too polluted with evil. And so I removed people from this Earth to be be put in a deep sleep, while I split everything and remade the world. But before that, world religions had their deities or prophets or what have you fulfill their apocalypse.

Contrary to their beliefs, I didn't want to have an apocalypse at all. There was too much the idea of killing off the wicked, and creating trouble to people caught in sin. Yet a lot of believers seemed like they would be disappointed, so I obliged their wishes without loss of life whenever possible. For example, while there was no lake of fire, the Christians who had not betrayed their faith were all raptured. They were here one moment, then they were in the Afterlife, leaving piles of clothing behind. For the most part, they decided to stay with me rather than returning to the New Earth. So I had a nudist colony, I guess. The only Christians today are called Revival Christians, those who found scraps of old Christian text. The Jews had their Messiah finally come, their Temple was rebuilt, and the dead were raised as Saints. These Saints were given the power to turn Ungorr and his zombies into dust with a touch. Those who were not slain were remade from zombies into a new lifeform. There are a fair number of them today, yet they are a pitiful race known as goblins. Miroku Buddhism was also founded at this time, when the Miroku came and taught pure dharma. These people tended to make long pilgrimages throughout the land, observing events of life and death. There were many other religions who had end times or a religious renewal, but too many to discuss in this text.

But the most shocking of all was the appearance of Lao Tzu, founder of Taoism. Taoism had never been a major religion, mainly consisting the idea of living in harmony with nature and returning to balance. They tended to not believe in the concept of apocalypse since the idea of good vs evil was abhorrent to them. Most of their followers were content to live in small towns, and let life go on as normal. And yet, these were interesting times, where the Tao was out of balance. He showed up and told everyone who was either a Taoist or not particularly committed to any one religion, "This world is to be flooded by darkness. Darkness and light become each other, decay and growth constantly alternate, and the Earth recreates itself. Join me, if you wish, and I will take you to the New Earth." And just like that, Taoism went from a largely insular group to one of the most popular religions. Like Jehovah's Witnesses, they even have started knocking on doors. Unlike the Jehovah's Witnesses though, they didn't push very hard. It was more like, "Do you have a moment to talk about the Tao?" and if they refused, the proselyte would basically just shrug and walk off.

I saved even the atheists, because they had none to come for them (Dawkins was a hack). Lacking any religious salvation that they would accept, I had one of my angels appear as some guy in a lab coat, and rescue them in a "rocket ship" while the Earth was recreated. What they didn't know about outer space wouldn't hurt them, so I let them see what they thought they were seeing. I came not to judge the world but to save it, so I

wanted as few people as possible to stay behind to witness this ruined Earth, but some refused to leave.

You may wonder a few things, like “Why doesn't this seem to match up with the sequence of prophetic texts like Revelation?” or “Why does there seem to be an apocalypse for virtually every religion?” Well, it's simple. These shocking end times are a fraud. I try not to take sides, and I save all of those that I can. It doesn't always work out though, so by the time the atheists were given a chance to leave, the Earth had become corrupt and darkened by pollution.

The souls of those that didn't accept me were melted down and recast into new life, using a process called the Six Paths. More on that later, but the point is, I don't do eternal torment. I desire all to be saved... no matter how many lifetimes it takes. And no, this isn't like reincarnation, such souls had no memory. I deposited these blank slates on the New Earth, in hopes that a better world might inspire them to be better humans.

In any case, this is how I offered a means for all of Earth's people regardless of their religion to be reborn on the New Earth. I am sorry that acted so much, but it was either this or let Earth be ruined, since many of the rules that I set up for myself to defend free will allowed such abuses to continue. And this is why it was senseless to try to block the path of the Oracle of Tao. Yes, I am well aware that this was a non sequitur.

ELIAS

I had known of the Oracle of Tao for some time now. I had spent several years in intensive study concerning predictive science, statistical analysis, and sociology. By compiling all of the data I had learned together with the prophecy from Delphi and her nuns, I was able to extrapolate the estimated physical traits of the coming Oracle, as well as the exact time she was likely to appear. This did not mean she could not be late. Such things are subject to our choices after all; however, it created a basic set of parameters that I could use to determine what to look for.

I knew for instance that she would have the tattoo, the Crest of the Oracle. I also knew from study of the past Oracles that they typically had a generally greater fear of death than the average person, a fear no longer common in humans of the New Earth, given the fact that nearly all living things now understood that there was an Afterlife. Lastly, I knew that the Oracle had two distinct traits: unusual physical features and the ability to distort probability. As a result of years of evolution, the human race now had difference shades of hair and eyes from those the original Earth were familiar with, but shades of blue, green, and purple were still roughly one in every one thousand people. My own silver hair was far more common, but still unusual. It wasn't enough though, so I used a prayer for Equal Fortune. Equal Fortune was the mystical equivalent of a Schrodinger's cat. If the person has strong bad fortune, their own purse would develop a hole when entering the area. If they have no fortune, nothing at all would happen. And of course, positive fortune would allow them to find money on the ground. This prayer could involve things other than money, but I wouldn't want her to hurt herself. That she had found a bag of money but the same bag also ripped meant she had powerful positive and negative fortune. I would have to test her power, so I said, “You are **unworthy** to bear the Crest. I must be the one to defeat you. Face me!” Well actually, she was at least potentially worthy. I saw her friends try to slip past, but they were kept at bay by my barrier. I looked at her companions. The warrior, was definitely a male, even though this was harder than normal to tell. He appeared to have some minor trappings of royalty in his walk and diction. The half-elf appeared to be much older than she conducted herself. I had read extensively in books concerning body language, even though I hadn't been around many people besides scholars. But I wonder, why was that elf behaving like a teenager? I considered possibly talking to her later, if she would permit me.

The Oracle got directly away from the point. “What are you doing inside a temple where men are kept out?” I would have thought the answer was obvious. I responded, “You didn't know about the back entrance?” I watched as her companion stared over at the archway with growing realization. “The back entrance...” the warrior said with a groan. This was all it took to start a battle against me.

I fight like a priest. It was, therefore, a long and frustrating battle for them. The

warrior would slash with the sword and use techniques, but no sooner did I take serious wounds than I used my healing ability to close my own wounds. The half-elf girl seemed completely uninterested in hurting me. To be fair, her options were limited. Sure, she could stab me with her daggers, but trying to use geomancy on holy ground tended to result in using sacred energy. Light did basically nothing to living creatures, just like Dark tended to ignore the undead. She instead decided to steal my priest's cane, which was actually a good idea, since it boosted my spiritual strength. Cheeky girl. I only wanted to test them, not hurt them, so it was probably fine that this happened. I finally surrendered after fighting for an hour or so, and used my remaining energy to cure wounds. I wheezed out, “So you were chosen as the Oracle of Tao? You defeated me, so my honor will not rest until I join you. My name is Elias.” The others introduced themselves, and I was generally impressed with everyone. I was impressed with Nevras and his incredible ability to pass as female, not his sword skill. Ambrosia, due to the fact that she had made it through the wilderness into this town with almost zero combat ability. And I wanted to get to know more of Aqorm. I decided to join them if only to get to know Aqorm better, but I kept my reasons to myself. It wouldn't do to appear too emotional. That would be unseemly. It seemed that this motley crew didn't care as much about public reputation as most people though. No sooner had I agreed to join this party and lend my healing skills than Ambrosia gave me a rather weak hug. Nevras gave her a hug while she did, and then Aqorm wrapped her arms tightly around me from behind. It was almost like... a family.

AQORM

After a heated battle, the four of us engaged in a group hug, and then proceeded to walk towards Delphi. Well, that's a slight exaggeration. I actually held Elias by the shoulder and dragged him off while he seemed about give some long-winded speech about the history of the Oracle of Delphi or some such. I admire his intelligence, but getting to the point is a good thing.

I definitely didn't need to know that the position of Delphi 's Oracle, also known as the Pythia was established in roughly 8th century BC, and continued until just around the 4th century, when Christianity, or the emperor, or maybe an earthquake destroyed the temple. In the New Earth, since Christianity was no longer around, the temple re-established itself in 4257 AD... yeah, he's still talking, even though I'm dragging him.

We stood before Delphi. I suspected her position was inherited, because unless she was a full-blooded elf, she couldn't possibly be this youthful. And the lack of pointed ears distinctive in both elves and half-elves confirmed it. At last, she spoke. “You must face the Trial of the Oracle.” Ambrosia appeared startled... for her, that is. “Huh? I came here for advice on a vision I had earlier. I don't even understand what an Oracle is...” Delphi calmly stated, “Relax, I'll tell you if you win.” Oh, not another battle!

At that, she arose from her seat where we could see her poofy white bridal dress in all of its glory. She began to circle around us, at first walking slowly, then gradually picking up speed until she appeared as a blur around us. In the place of one blond woman in a white dress, there were three women forming a triangle around us. One stood in front, appearing as we originally saw, the two diagonally behind us appeared like color-swapped versions of her. The one behind to my left was a red-haired woman with her white dress a mild pink tone, the other had black hair and her dress was a soft bluish-white. All had identical hairstyle, and all seemed to be acting and talking in sync, “Only one of me is real. Guess the right one, and you shall earn my power!” Honestly, I didn't think Ambrosia could do it.

AMBROSIA

I admit, I was tempted to just whack away at was clearly the original one. But I decided to hold off for a second and observe, since I was certain any serious attempt attack the wrong one would probably wind up with all of us dead. I defended, and looked from version to version of Delphi. As I looked, suddenly I felt strange. I remembered all of the dreams that I had instead of proper memories. They all came rushing back to me, dreams of events that hadn't happened yet. I felt a power within me of observation and prediction. While I couldn't really see the future or anything, I had a sense of roughly

how strong my adversaries were. It was almost more like a hunch than prophecy, but I had a keen sense of any weaknesses of Delphi, how wounded she was, and most importantly, it let me determine the real one as easily as would be the case if there was a large white arrow pointing at her and saying “real one.” Somehow I instinctively could tell that the blond Delphi was fake, as was the girl with black hair. When I looked at the ginger though, it just felt right to attack her. Ummm, I don't mean it like that.

I hit her hard and repeatedly with my fishing pole (I needed a better weapon soon), knocking her to the ground. Suddenly, the three girls faded away, and only the original was left. “Ow, I mean... Congratulations, you made a wise choice!” She stepped away from us, and sat back down in her original spot. It was almost like she had never moved from there, and there was some kind of battle mode that put her in another position. “So... you are indeed a bearer of the Crest. No need to disguise yourselves, I know there are men among you.”

Nevras appeared embarrassed and more than a little upset. I asked, “Then why the elaborate attempt to keep men out?” Delphi grinned. “Because men in drag are hawt! Why do you think so many of them were on the streets?” And yes, she said it like 'hawt' rather than 'hot.' She explained that Aqorm, our helpful ally had been willing participant in a paid town program to feminize much of the town's male population. Aqorm wanted to hide in a hole, until I assured her that it was actually okay, and we forgave her. I totally understood Delphi's motivations. Nevras looked like he was ready to explode. “...” he said. I said nothing.

After a long moment, Delphi said, “Anyway... I'm sure you're wondering what your quest is for. A while ago, a wizard stole a mystical urn. This urn was said to contain something of awesome power, which could only be released with 13 mystical crystals,” she said, coming across as having an even more strange way of talking than I do. “Supposedly, it was even sealed by God. As you know, breaking an Edict of God can probably end the world entirely, so you must stop it. To do this requires equally great power and a strong heart. Hence, the Crests are needed.” And that was all she had to say. I decided the conversation had some holes in it. What exactly we were to do next? I kept talking to her until finally she told us, “The Sage Lao Tzu can be found deep in the mountains nearby. He can tell you more about this.”

We hurriedly left the town, with Nevras looking ready to scream. I didn't let him remove his dress and other gear until nightfall, because frankly he really did look quite pretty in it. We walked towards the mountain we had seen earlier, trying to find a path up the mountain. Having circled around the southeastern side of the mountain to the forests of the north, we were almost about to head back towards a large tree near the northwestern side of the mountain that had been dubbed the Great Tree, when a group of centaurs showed up. We had not been without conflict on our journey so far. I just didn't want to remember it. There were ferocious bunnies in large packs and fearsome pixies, and the horrific strawman. The strawman, true to its name, resembled a practice target, with basically no ability to attack or run, and propensity for making weak arguments that even I understood were a fallacy. “If you don't believe in Roman Catholicism, you must be an atheist,” the last one told us shortly before I knocked it over with my fishing hook. These centaurs that we found in the woods were obviously sweet and friendly. They were so obviously sweet and friendly that they pulled out their longbows and began to fire arrows at us. I immediately hid in the bushes, while the others weren't so lucky.

CHAPTER 3

In which Nevras is badly wounded, and Ambrosia meets a cat.

NEVRAS

The centaurs were excellent archers, and I was stuck in place defending Elias since he was our healer. In retrospect, this was around the time I decided to invest in a shield.

Arrows hurt. I know this seems like a stupid thing to say, but from the historical archives of film we watched at the castle, it seemed like there were an awful lot of them that behaved like you can take ten or twelve arrows and still live. I'm looking at you,

Princess Agents. Or they showed people pulling arrows out of people with no issues.

No. An arrow is like a large splinter driven into your body. Trying to remove it without knowing exactly what you're doing would be a recipe for disaster, since the arrow was actually holding in blood from leaking out of the body. Or they sometimes have it broken off, and then they push it through instead. Breaking it off is probably a better idea, but pushing it through wrong can catch on organs or bones, creating a fish-hook bend, or that arrow that you just broke wrong introduced wood shards inside the body. Thankfully, my armor had cushioned the one that hit my torso to the point where it was only a flesh-wound. He pulled this one out easily and healed it up. The other two was in an arm and my knee, the former had hit a blood vessel.

As I was being treated by Elias, from out of the corner of my eye, I saw Aqorm. She raised her hands over her head, and knelt to the ground in respect for the land, placing both hands on it. The centaurs were loading more arrows, but it was already too late. The land mana drew from the forest, covering them all with vines and thorns. They dropped their bows abruptly and were pinned to the ground. Their hooves floundered on the ground. The good news was they wouldn't be fighting anyone any time soon. The bad news was, as she had explained to us in an earlier battle, “If I were a real elf, I could draw mana from the land properly. But I can only use this ability once a day.” Any of these critters that showed up after this would be trouble.

The sudden pain brought me back to attention. Elias wasn't doing it right. Yes, he had managed a creative approach, cutting off at both tips so the arrow was one big column, but the way he pulled at these all at once was making things go dimmmmm....

ELIAS

Despite all claims to the contrary, I did know what I'm doing. Yes, the way I pulled this arrow was rather abrupt, but there was no real right way to remove an arrow. I was careful to make sure of two things first. I twisted it around to make certain there was no muscle or bone before pulling, and I gently tugged from the point end (being sure to actually remove the ends, so there was no foreign matter), and secondly I made sure he was lying on the ground with my other hand directly over the wound, so I could heal when I felt blood. Starting behind the knee, I pulled. It had pierced straight through the patella, all the way through the bones and the cartilage behind, and I was pushing it through from the front.

As I felt blood, I closed the knee up using my healing ability. Unlike the surgical medicine of those ages called the modern ages, I had virtually no need to see any of this. I simply called on the power to heal, and it did. Healing bone and cartilage took significantly more effort, since the bone healing actually involved rapidly clotting the blood to heal with any speed, and heavy amounts of collagen sealed the bone from infection. This is the point at which he passed out. The healing would continue, with the collagen hardening into a sort of bone cluster, and then finally the area would flatten out; of course, the difference was this would take hours rather than weeks and be strong as before. It would look very lumpy in the meantime despite my healing, but healing always set matter to repair itself to its original state, even if I were healing a slime. I really didn't need to know how the body worked since it was on a basic level just programming the body to heal itself, but in practice, the more that I knew about an organ, the less mystic power it actually took. I pulled the other end out, and closed off the wound.

It was time for bad news. I had just healed myself several times today, healed the party of all bruises, and performed a complex healing. I was good for just one more heal, and it had to count. I had a choice, I could either focus my healing on the outside, stopping the bleeding from spilling out but risking internal bleeding, or the opposite. I could wait, but moving him right now would be hard if there were any pieces that could shift, the shaft might slip out anyway. I took a risk and pulled it out as fast as possible, then as soon as I could tell that the arrow was clear, I rejoined the blood vessel. The blood was still leaking out the side! He would bleed out....

AMBROSIA

“No! Nevras! Don't go....” I was probably showing a lot more emotion that normal, but c'mon, I'm not made of stone. I jumped out of the bushes and wrapped his wound

with my apron. Elias helped secure the makeshift bandage properly. Even Aqorm seemed concerned, but I could never tell what she was thinking. Working together, Aqorm and Elias built a stretcher to cart off Nevras to someplace safer. How did she know how to do this?

It was slow going, but with the three of us walking together we managed to bring Nevras to the Great Tree. The area was filled with tourists and earth elementals. These ones looked like moles in a tight cluster. There was an old man dressed up like a chief, and there was a girl who was obviously waiting for someone to get back. I asked her about it, and she said, “My boyfriend agreed to meet me here after he visits the world's temples. He's a Miroku Buddhist, and we promised to get married and stuff. This tree itself is holy, so it's part of our pilgrimage.” Her face showed concern, and a flicker of something else. It almost looked like she recognized Nevras, but then she looked away.

Nevras meanwhile seems to still be doing poorly. It looked like the attempt to heal hadn't had enough energy after all, and only partly succeeded. He was slowly but steadily continuing to bleed out.

I called to the old man, “Please! Help us! Our friend is bleeding out.” The old man said, “Legend has it that when the Earth was remade, God planted a seed so that life would always grow in the world. This is now the Great Tree,” he continued, “Your friend... he is dear to you? Place his body in the water near the roots. The Tree has healing properties.” I wished he could have said that first! Now my friend was worse because he had to talk about history... I lifted him like a bride gets carried across the threshold, and gently laid him in the water, being careful to rest his head on the roots so he wasn't at risk of drowning. I looked at the other two (particularly Aqorm) and said, “Don't you *dare* tell Nevras I was worried about him.” I quickly moved in position behind the other two, so he didn't see me looking concerned if he woke up. It's not like I'm into him, or anything.

GOD

While all of you are wondering what befell the young one known as Nevras, I will speak of teleology. I have spoken of the end of the old Earth, and of the dawn of Creation, but this is, so to speak, about the purpose of the universe.

Say someone plants a seed. That seed “knows” it will become a tree. This, by the way, is how all of creation works, from healing to setting a fire to dousing it, because this is also how the Tao works. Drops of water, even those made by runes, don't have to ask what to do with soil or wood or flames, they simply soak it because this is how they are made. When I said for there to be Light, it fulfilled its purpose. Light is to shine forth through the darkness and to make things whole. It made creation possible. Likewise, water was supposed to clean wounds, so that the tree could heal. And that is precisely what it did to Nevras.

NEVRAS

I opened my eyes slowly, the world looking fresh and new to my eyes like I had been reborn. Looking around, I saw the others standing at a distance away from me. Ambrosia seemed to be hiding behind the others. Normally, she stayed near my side with relative apathy, but today she seemed extra disinterested, refusing to come closer until the rest of the group had also approached. Odd. Ambrosia told me about some strange girl who had been waiting for a Miroku Buddhist, who wandered off shortly after she saw our group. I could swear that sounded like my youngest sister Chastity.

We asked the old man about the mountain, and it turned out that pretty much everyone else headed south and east to find a rather well-worn and obvious path up the mountain, instead of circling around the back end. People did that? After everyone spent some time sleeping and recovering, we made our way to the proper entrance to the mountain.

The path up the mountain was a strenuous climb. It was relatively shallow but kept winding back and forth. The mountain was broken into a series of plateaus that cut sharply into sheer rock walls. The walls were steep enough to be practically unclimbable, rising up like a shelf of earth. All along the path, weak beasts plagued us. On the path crawled some small venomous snakes here and there, on the wall hung groups of spiders.

The spiders of New Earth are not like those of Earth. God had ordained that small venomous creatures were too hard for humans to see and made spiders range from the smallest size as big as a kitten, to roughly that of an eighteen-wheeler. Shouldn't have bothered, God. For the most part small critters like this were not a big problem for me, as I was able to slice them up rather quickly. We managed to get some snake meat out of the whole thing, yet Ambrosia got some web in her hair and shoulder. “Ptui!” she spat out the mucilaginous substance, and desperately tried to wipe it off, only to get more caught. It was endearing, in a deeply dorky way.

As we climbed the mountain, I felt the air get colder until we saw snow falling. There was a nearby cave that appeared be man-made, just for such a purpose of climbing to the upper part of the mountain without slipping and falling to your doom. The cavern spiraled from behind so as to provide ease of climbing up and down. “Let's stop and eat.” Despite having rested, we haven't eaten anything since our journey started, and it was time. After beheading and cleaning the snakes of their venom sacs, and setting aside their skin for later use, I likewise reserved the food for later. Elias cast a prayer commonly used for preserving bodies from rot. I was told there was some kind of issue preventing that prayer from being used recklessly, though. We didn't want to overwork him, he had already removed a few doses of snake and spider venom from our bodies for every time Aqorm or I screwed up and got bit instead. Ambrosia pulled out some yak meat she had been keeping, along with some cookware. We could definitely make a good stew from this. Climbing to the top of the cave I gathered some snow to later melt for water. Ambrosia told Elias and Aqorm, “You need to gather some wood because I don't have an axe.” In response to her slightly rude demand, Aqorm grumbled a bit under her breath. So I asked her, “Ambrosia, could you make a fire to...” I looked at her blank look and immediately felt sad for her. “You bought all of that gear but never managed any kind of flint and steel, huh?”

By this point, Elias and Aqorm had left so they were probably not within earshot. Her perpetually composed face broke into tears. “I'm sorry! I'm poor, and I've been poor since childhood!” She told me about how she had amnesia before a certain age, how she was adopted by a family, and how things turned south around the point where she lived alone. “I gave my money to several investors that promised to increase my money, but instead... they took my money and ran!” She talked about years on the street, eating food that wasn't generally fit for eating, how she had never had any proper tools to even build a fire so she eat meat cold and raw for years, and lacking a knife, usually whole too. I was surprised that she was alive, honestly, but this made me believe even more that should she would not judge me for being effeminate.

While we had talked, Aqorm and Elias gathered wood, and when they returned (hours later) they were talking about something out of context for us, something about something called Operation Paul Bunyan. I could hear Aqorm giggling about this. I pulled out my dagger of First Iron, and struck it against a First Flint stone until it made sparks. First Materials could recover from anything, including breakage and rust. But most First Materials were unbelievably expensive and rare. They were effectively priceless, as materials could not be gathered; they were from another dimension after all. To have this reusable firestarter wound up costing Phoenix as much as their castle *per tool*. Since this was completely impractical for military use, we instead invested in the creation of the highly break and rust-resistant durasteel. It turned out, though, part of why fires started was the flaking of iron caused tiny shards to rust. The fire was actually from the metal rusting, so my katana was completely unable to start fires. First Material on the other hand, was ideal for this purpose as these two could immediately bounce back from striking against each other.

To have a fine steel weapon suddenly fall apart on you is no good. This was the reason for the Second Bronze Age, in fact. During this time, people became interested in archaeology. Having noticed that their own history was becoming lost, they began to create artifacts of new alloys: durasteel, mithril, adamant, ceramics, and even a hard plastic known is carboniform. Of course, future generations didn’t necessary know what these artifacts *were*. Some of them concluded that a rifle must be some ancient object used for rituals.

I looked into Ambrosia's eyes as she watch me set this fire. To her, she had no idea of the monetary value of this stuff, but the emotional value was worth more to her than anything I could imagine. “Here you go,” I handed her these tools to keep. Her eyes lit up and she dropped her guard, and then started sobbing. I held her tightly until she stopped.

The fire began to blaze under the pot. I added the meat and grilled it on the pan. Each of us had brought something to the meal. I added potatoes, carrots, and peppers that I had bought from the store. Elias had many herbs and spices that were also considered medicinal, which he added to season the soup, and he also carried extremely high quality Five Source Purification salt, which was also used for exorcism of undead. Aqorm had some wild onions, garlic, and some wine. I had originally considered taking the meat and veggies out of the pan but instead I elected to simply cover it, while I melted the snow in another pot. We drank some of this water, and the rest was added to deglaze the pan while we stirred the stew.

It was a meal that was so soft and tender that I can't describe it, except to say that the garlic completely blended with the wine, the other herbs, and strong taste of meat in the thick broth. The salt was of such fine quality that there was in fact no salt taste at all, having completely dissolved into the flavor. Somehow, everything just blended together to make what a stew should be. After the meal, we set up a tent inside the cave, and went to sleep. We had a long hard hike the next day, and we needed to be well-rested.

AQORM

Ambrosia sent us off to gather wood in the forest. She was getting bossy, with all of her psychic scanning abilities and her sacred destiny. Not that I had any reason suspect her word of being anything but... “Hey.” This was the first time we had talked alone “Elias, you know how to show events from the past, right? Might you be able to tell me where Ambrosia came from?”

Elias raised an eyebrow. “I suppose I might. Are you really that suspicious?” I shrugged, “It's not really that I suspect her, but... I make it a policy to not trust someone without getting to know them well. Why, she could be a spy! Or an alien!” At this, Elias started giggling.

“Very well. If we must find out, I'm gonna need some hair, a tear, a grain of sand, and something belonging to Ambrosia. With this stuff I can do a ritual to find out what you need.” I snuck back to camp to grab something of hers. The apron she used to tie Nevras's wounds earlier should do just fine. As I came closer, I listened in on her conversation from the bushes while looking for an opportunity to sneak away with this bandage. I would do anything to find out the truth.

As it turned out, Ambrosia volunteered about her past on her own in the next few minutes, telling all of the graphic details of life on the street. I had also lived on the street, and had survived by becoming a thief and a professional makeup artist. They did not know about my past brushes with the law, but... I would keep her secret until she wanted to confess to us about it. And I would give them some alone time. I edged back to Elias. “So, you got something of hers?” I shook my head. “Here's something of mine.” I twisted a small chunk of my hair into a loop, then cut it with my dagger, then handed him both my hair and my dagger to borrow. “Huh?” I responded, “I want you to know about my past.”

ELIAS

I looked at the objects granted to me. Hair for connection to the person, tears for a drop of vision, a grain of sand to represent a moment in time, and a valued possession to represent her truest self. I said the words, “*If it is your will, grant me a vision of the past*.” Aqorm was a young child, just born. I saw her father, an aquatic elf. I saw her mother, a wood elf. They appeared to have some family business...

Here, the images became grainy. This was a memory that she was unwilling or unable to remember.

I saw her growing older. She became a teenager, and I watched her grow up. Her family lived thousands of years, and I saw her reading at home. Finally, as her parents insisted she become... she told them she wanted to be a musician. I watched her play classical music all the way up to modern music. Soon she was composing her own

pieces. I saw her as she lived on the street, resorting to theft to survive. And finally she came to my town. I saw her make a deal with Delphi.

"There's something you're not telling me." I said, raising an eyebrow. Aqorm blushed slightly, "Yeah, that. My parents are able to live so well because we're exotic dancers. In fact, most of my siblings are too. I was the black sheep, and got mixed up in a lot of theft because my parents hoped I would follow in the family trade." I questioned her, "They threw you out?" Aqorm muttered, "No, I left. The rent was free, but I believed that I would never accept me," she continued, "since I was dead set at fulfilling my dreams. They would never understand what it's like to strike out on your own and follow your dreams."

I replied, "Leaving your loved ones to pursue ideals is a common thing for people to do, but I'm not entirely sure that it's all that clever a thing to do. I mean, you left a place where people cared for you, loved you, and sheltered you. You refused their support, instead turning to crime, all because you believed they wouldn't understand. What if you're wrong?"

At this, Aqorm roared, "**How dare you?!?**" Calming down slightly, she asked, "What gives you the right to talk to me like that?"

I think she wanted me to yell right back at her, but I explained, "I believe most parents love their children. But it seems like, in the process of striking out on your own, your parents possibly suffered as well. I don't think it's mandatory that you follow their dreams, but I do think most of all, your family wants to hear from you. I don't believe it's fair to them to expect them never to understand having your own dream. Were your grandparents exotic dancers?"

Aqorm softened. She was probably imagining her grandparents pole-dancing, because shortly thereafter she started giggling uncontrollably. I almost told her that her grandparents (as pure elves) would probably be able to do that forever and still look sexy, but then she probably knew that, and I figured it might ruin the moment. Her laugh was lyrical yet sad, the laugh of someone who had experience in great quantities over centuries yet still bore hope. "No, definitely not!" she said between giggles, "Hey, you're kind of funny. Could you tell me some stuff, just to make me laugh and take my mind off things?" I can't really tell jokes. Instead, told her several stories while walked back to camp, that I happened to think were funny. I talked about odd or interesting events in history, philosophy (she liked Plato's Cave), and even some laughably bad scientific theories that people used to believe were true, such as the Flat Earth theory. I can't imagine what sort of person would ever think that was true.

We were starting to walk back when I told her one last tale, carrying our load of wood. "In Korea, back in the 20th century, soldiers were trying to fight, but kept being ambushed since a large poplar blocking the view. When they tried to trim it, they were met by guards telling them that they were not allowed, because that tree had personally been planted by the leader of the country despite it being over 100 years old. When they tried, they wound up getting killed, and chainsaws got clogged by the sap of the tree. By the end of it, they sent in tanks, Special Forces, artillery, grenade launchers, martial artists, and heavy artillery to try to get rid of this tree. And that..." All that Nevras and Ambrosia heard by the time we made it back with the wood was probably "... And that was Operation Paul Bunyan."

AMBROSIA

Walking up the mountain was a slow process. Our path led to a steep cliff overhang. The ice and snow made every step extremely treacherous, so we walked along, one step, then another step, and another. Walking along this way, we managed to avoid falling to our doom.

Finally, the path of snow widened as the extreme overhang joined with the main part of the mountain. It was just fortunate we were walking up and not trying to climb it from underneath. But still. Walking on slick ice is no picnic. On the top of the mountain, I looked around. I exclaimed, "There's nothing here?!? All that climbing for **nothing**?" Nevras sighed, "Calm down, maybe we took a wrong turn at some point." I'm sorry, but I kind of wanted to be a drama queen here. "That's easy for you to say, you seem to always

be calm, don't you?" To be honest, this wasn't really fair to him, but yeah, I had just walked up an icy mountain. Aqorm decided to get involved, and cried out, "**Hey**! Nevras is right, you know?" I took a deep breath and spoke, "...Okay. I'll try to have more faith. Sorry, Nevras, for snapping at you." He grinned, "It's okay, I forgive you." I looked around again, "But, I don't have any idea how to cross here."

Just then, I heard a noise. "Miau," hollered a white and black cat. It was a cute little thing, and I desperately needed to pet it. Yet, how did it get here? "A cat? What's it doing up here?" I said. This mountain was steep and rugged, and we hadn't seen any easy paths. I barely had time to consider this question before something impossible happened. The cat jumped off the cliff, and landed on its feet in midair. From here, the cat continued until it rested on a floating island in midair. "What in the Six Paths? It just jumped onto the air." Nevras and Elias finished each other's sentences, "It's a... a hidden path?" I asked the others, "Is this a Pattern?"

ELIAS

When people said Pattern, they mean illusion. There's many types of illusion, but three that everyone know. An illusion that surrounds an area and displays its to anyone who entered is called a Pattern, an illusion cast around a person to disguise them is called a Glamour, and then one cast against a person to control what they see is called a Figment. Glamours were simple, efficient, and foolproof until you touched the person, even allowing even a fat person to assume the form of a thinner person. Figments were pretty much only used to gaslight people, because only a single person could see something, so the whole thing fell apart unless you either cast the same spell multiple times or had a few accomplices. The flaw of a Pattern was that it was fixed around a caster, or fixed around an area, and that it displayed a pre-recorded image. Having something enter or exit was simply not possible, nor was hiding objects. If it was an illusion, it definitely wasn't a Pattern.

Hmm. There was one way to find out. "*Disbelieve*!" This was a radius effect that would dispel all illusion. Unfortunately, it did nothing. Taking my staff, I tested, poking at the air where it stepped. Something wasn't there, but then it was.

This wasn't a Pattern, it was a Paradigm. The matter was solid, but only so much as we were convinced it was. If we for a second stopped believing that it was real, we would begin to fall through. "Aqorm, this is a Paradigm, take my hand, I'll guide you through." After the long talk we had, she seemed to not be averse to trusting me. Which was good, since I needed her to believe in something, it didn't need to be the flooring itself. I wasn't sure about the others. How would they fare?

NEVRAS

Being well-educated, I knew what a Paradigm was, but my heart was filled with uncertainty. Unlike the guards of some towns, I wasn't an atheist. But I didn't have a specific religion either. I didn't know how strong my faith was. And yet, I took one step into the air.

The surface felt like gelatin. It heaved and wobbled under my indecision, as though deciding what to do with me. Each moment that passed, uncertainty gave way to doubt. I was going to sink, I knew it! I wasn't strong enough.

Then a hand clasped mine, and pulled me back from the edge. "Nevras," she said, "believe in me. Let's do this together." Slowly, yet surely, we stepped forward, one foot, then another, until we were standing in midair, and walking forward. No longer was there jelly wobble, the ground was firm. For some reason, I never saw Ambrosia as having any particular belief either, but she must have been believing in *something* because this ground was as firm as rock.

The view was incredible. Unlike the whole adage, "don't look down," I did so and yet felt no fear. I saw the clouds, which every now and then cleared, showing the land beneath. I saw the Great Tree from before, the eastern forests, and directly below I saw plains and grasslands. If I looked off to the distance, I could faintly see the island of Ghobli and its lagomorphic features. The island of Ghobli was believed to be formed when a man with a massive supply of bunnies crash landed into the water; the bunnies died, but according to the legend formed the island. Seen from here, I could definitely see

the resemblance.

Ambrosia held my hand tightly, and brought me back to focus. We walked ahead to the floating island in the sky. I saw a priest, a peddler, and the cat from before. The others had already bought better weapons and gear than before, and seemed to believe they were about to fight at some point. Meanwhile, the priest accosted Ambrosia. “Pardon me,” he proselytized, “but have you been saved?”

Ambrosia returned with a question of her own. “What's this about?” The priest explained salvation, then led her to a big glowing circle, “Come sit here in this sacred circle, and I will work to save your soul.” He continued for a while, until... “There now. Whenever you find one of these circles, your soul will return to this location, and your body with it. The same goes for the rest of your group. You may even be able to set up some sort of tent within this circle.” Ambrosia shrugged and stepped outside of the circle.

CHAPTER 4

In which Ambrosia learns the Way, and discovers rhythm and dance.

AMBROSIA

There stood the cat. Having thoroughly prepared by not buying anything, and having sat in some circle while some guy preached to me, I knew now what I needed to do. I needed to pet its ears.

“Mreowrrr,” the beast said, followed by a gentle purr, “rrrrrrrrrr....” I finally got the desire to pet the cat out of my system, and stopped petting. The cat suddenly stopped purring and nipped me. “That was so good, why did you stop?” I glared at the cat, and then I told it, “Well, I definitely won't keep petting you, now that you nipped me! ...I mean, you can talk?!? How can you talk?!?”

The cat looked at me quizzically, and then started to climb up my body while explaining. “My name is Lao Tzu. I have known you would come to seek my guidance.” I was a bit taken aback, in-between vainly trying to grab a cat as he squirmed around my back. Finally, I shrugged and gave up, letting him crawl across my shoulders or wherever else he wanted to go as we spoke. Elias spoke while I was annoyed and frustrated, “Wait, you're the Lao Tzu? The founder of Taoism? But I thought he was... much older, with a beard and ummm... not a cat.” The cat meowed out and responded, “Humans and other creatures learn and grow throughout their lifetime, and their soul stores memories for the next reincarnation. This cat is cute, so....”

He paused his speech to jump off my back, then pulled out a wooden staff from somewhere and spun it around. “In order to use your power, you must learn to use the Trigrams. I will instruct you. But first, I will battle you before I teach you how to defeat me.” Something about this sequence seemed strange.

My allies joined in the battle. They had learned a few new moves as a result of meeting constant challenges along the road. Nevras leaped in the air, and brought it in a wide sweeping motion, sending an aftershock of air in a wide arc. “*Jump Thrust*!” he yelled. Lao Tzu jumped high in the air as well, over the shock wave created by the weapon. He did it so easily that it was clear that physical attacks wouldn't work. Elias spoke the words, “*Dark*,” and sent a ball of inky blackness sailing towards the cat. After he landed, seeing a wave of umbral energy zoom towards him, he waved around his staff and it sucked in all darkness. Taking a chance, Elias switched to the Light effect, even though it usually did nothing to living creatures. The cat yawned, as he didn't even try to block. Elias quickly adapted, and cast a volley of randomly alternating Light and Dark abilities of different powers and sizes. This cute little kitty seemed to almost dance past all of these attacks, periodically swinging his staff to knock aside something. He adjusted to the flow of combat, even using the slight amount of wind force exerted by each ball to move around it and spin past the next attack. All of a sudden, Elias created two very wide range attacks, in rapid succession. “*Twilight*! *Sunrise*!” he said. A ring of darkness pulsed through the area in a circle around Elias, only hitting desired targets but nonetheless incredibly terrifying, followed in close proximity to a ring of purest light. The feline form hunched for a second as if to brace for impact, and pointed his staff forward and slowly

tilted it in a long circle, gradually moving faster as if a painter brushing over a spot. The air spun, as did the shape of the ring, coiling into the gap where the staff twirled along a central point. After there was a nice ball of darkness formed within, he began to move the staff in the opposite direction, and the darkness uncoiled, flowing outward until it hit the light, and dispersed it. Elias cried, “Now, Aqorm!” and she sent her geomancy towards him.

Unlike Elias and Nevras, she couldn't learn any new abilities. Such was geomancy that the caster had one spell despite its adaptability to terrain. This time, it took the form of a series of stone spikes, due to her presence on the mountain. It looked extremely massive, and there was no way he could possibly... and he blocked it without the slightest bit of effort, simply by resting his staff upright on the ground. “I thought so,” explained Elias, “he's using the Tao. We could completely expend our mystic power here, but he's simply redirecting our power without using any mystic power of his own. The only thing I know that doesn't use any mystic power is prayer, and most of this is not answered against a living target. You're expecting Ambrosia to fight you alone, are you not?” The cat purred and smiled, showing fang-like teeth. “That is correct.” Sigh... This guy was a freak, I wasn't sure what I could do to him. I drew my dagger and lunged forward, only to have him deftly step aside, and swat it aside. I put my knife away and swung with my fishing pole. He jumped over my shoulder and pounced me from behind. I swung the rod to try to tie him up, sure that he wouldn't be able to resist... and he somehow slipped out simply by dropping all resistance. “Grrrrr,” I said. The strange little cat said, “You won't defeat me that way! Use the technique I'm going to teach you!”

The technique he was going to teach? Right... and yet, somehow I remembered being taught this technique after the battle. “Yes! Yes! The power of the Oracle flows from your awareness of prophecy!” This felt different from my Predict ability, it felt like I was drawing out energy left deep within the universe. The Trigram ability was not like thaumaturgy or a prayer. It was a sort of dance. I noticed that the tattoo on my palm had changed. It now had octagon covered with broken and unbroken lines in a complex pattern surrounding the original Yin Yang design, much like the flag of South Korea. When the dance was done, I was to press my hands to the ground. It was a bit like geomancy, except for two major differences. First, the effect used nothing much. Also, it was a random chance effect. There was a one in eight chance of activating a single trigram: Heaven, Earth, Fire, Water, Wind, Thunder, Mountain, or Lake. These trigrams would temporarily place themselves on the target, and then the effect would activate. Lake would produce a pinprick that would kill someone mortally wounded but otherwise do little harm. Heaven would actually heal the person. The others all drained their life force by varying amounts, but usually left them still alive. The first time I did this, of course, I managed to pull out the one trigram that actually healed him. “That tickles,” he said, purring profusely.

Bouncing back from the... non-attack, he lunged forward. “Remember what I am going to teach you.” Suddenly, memories of being taught defensive and evasive moves came rushing back... even though I had never actually learned anything yet. I saw the cat teaching me to feel the Tao as a force surrounding all life, which flowed from all places to all places. He showed me how everything, even the lightest breeze was part of what he called the flow, and I remembered him teaching how to move with it.

I definitely couldn't do anything on the level of blocking effects or returning it to its source, but I had a sense of how to feel the rhythm, the flow of the other person's speed and strength. I was probably hopeless with regard to any kind of area attack, and someone with serious skill could probably defeat me, but by going with the flow, I was able to ease out of the way and move around his attack. I tried again to use the Trigrams as soon as I gained some breathing room. And again...

By about the fifth try, I finally managed to defeat him. His beat-up form rose from the ground, and he let out a great bellowing meow. “Miaaaaaaaaaaauuuuuu~~~” Finally, he bowed to me, and said, “Congratulations, now I shall train you.” Perplexed, I asked, “How is it that I was able to learn these techniques before you trained me?” The cat nodded, “Yes, I understand it would be difficult to understand. As Oracle, your memory isn't quite normal. You past is blocked for quite a bit, some of which is to use this power.

Sometimes you will be able to remember the future, like you did here. But for now, when you remember the future, the present events will be gone to you...” I blinked.

“...Your training is now complete. Take the tent that I gave you earlier, and the ticket to Ghobli. Each trigram will need to be turned white on your Crest, before the tattoo is able to use its full power. Go and see the Oracle you meet near Zuran.” When did he give us a tent? Weird. It was snowing on the mountain. And I was wearing scarf and heavy wool pullover over my clothing... which smelled like Nevras. He smelled like strawberries~ I could swear Elias had a bit more beard and his robe looked frayed at the edges. Aqorm's hair had grown out and she was looking peeved. Nevras looked happy to see me, but I had no idea why. It looked like all of their outfits were somewhat more scuffed up, and visible frost had grown on their clothing.

We headed down the mountain, across the bridge of air that had troubled us before, and down the ice-covered slope. The others were still walking very slowly down the slope, even using their weapons to stabilize them. Meanwhile, I somehow understood where and how to step in order not to slide. Aqorm had her fey agility helping her some, but despite walking twice the speed of the others, she was still moving much slower than me. Elias lost his footing suddenly. He grabbed Nevras, causing both of them to slide forward. Aqorm quickly formed a solid spike wall of packed ice, stopping them from meeting their end from the cliff. Huh. I thought she already used her geomancy today. After they brushed themselves off, we carefully made it back to the cave.

AQORM

Six months. That's how long we waited on that accursed island in the middle of the air. The island was originally grassy and green, unlike the mountain near it. But even that changed as we waited until summer turned into the start of winter. The cat trained her every day, showing her something that looked like *tai chi*, and teaching her to move differently, so she could dodge anything. The cat told her stuff that seemed silly, even in light of all that we had seen before; nonetheless, given the cat Sage's proficiency in martial and mystical arts, we basically listened without question. The cat also gave us a ticket to a ship which we weren't supposed to take for quite some time, and a tent which he declared to be enchanted even though it looked like it had been patched several times. He also showed Elias how to block simple thaumaturgy with his staff.

In the summer and fall we foraged the island for greens, and Lao Tzu caught his own fish. These were Dream Fish, mind you, so yes, they were swimming around at this high altitude. Dream Fish rode the tide of human dreams to all sorts of dimensions. To have some picture of what this looks like, think of a goldfish with extreme psychedelic coloration and body size roughly that of an elephant, coupled with innate reality warping powers and a nasty bubble attack. This tiny cat was able to take down such a creature as if it were nothing at all.

Dream Fish tasted weird. We ate it constantly but the taste was never the same. It tasted strongly of whatever food you were thinking of right at the moment, which could be great or horrible, depending on your last thought. Given that the food always tasted different, we never got bored of the food, but we were probably malnourished.

As time passed, we grew closer together. Elias and I began to loosen up, and just sort of talk about random stuff. It was slow, because both of us had lived too long and been so deprived of the outside world that we were awkward. Gradually though, we began to connect more and more. We still had yet to kiss or cuddle, but he had taken to patting my shoulder in a slightly patronizing way when I was upset. It was annoying, and I know I should hate it, but... I didn't.

Likewise, Ambrosia and Nevras became closer too. They began to cuddle with each other all the time. Nevras initially seemed to only mildly be interested in her, while Ambrosia was very much infatuated with him. But this gradually changed. They began giving each other gifts, and more frequently showing their affection. I even caught them trying to kiss one another. But they seemed uncomfortable displaying affection openly in front of us, or one of them had deep emotional insecurity and a fear of intimacy. My money was on Ambrosia. She was doing well, considering. But it also meant it might be years, or never, before either of them did anything more than kiss or cuddle.

At some point, Nevras talked about his parents, and how he was the crown prince of the kingdom (such as it was) of Phoenix. He talked in detail, and I decided that despite being nosy thus far, I would leave them alone for a while. It was obviously important to him that she remembered this.

Later, when it began to turn to winter, he pulled out a fur coat and put it on. But as he noticed that she had no such luxury, she ultimately gave it to her. Given his... condition, Nevras did not have that strong a scent, nor a particularly manly one, he smelled more like fresh strawberries with a hint of iron odor, and only when he really sweated (I could only smell it from here because I was an elf). Yet this odor clung to the sweater for weeks, because she refused to wash it. Not long after that, her training ended, and I saw something weird happen. I watched her eyes, and suddenly it felt like a computer rebooting itself. She was barely finished being proud of the sweater he gave her, and then all of a sudden she looked confused as to where she even got it.

AMBROSIA

We made it down the mountain quickly after that. Once the terrain was no longer rough, Aqorm and Nevras formed the lead. I wasn't any faster than before, the knowledge of the Tao just made me more graceful. Since they were athletic, they made me look slow when in battle, and yet here on the snow I moved like everyone else was standing still. If anything, my speed was more steady now than before. Elias followed at my heels, ready to heal if things got bad. It was so strange, he had just been lobbing tons of energy at that cat just today, and yet he already looked fully healed. The rest of them did too. In fact, it looked like Nevras had trained. He didn't look more muscular, just leaner. The cat had said something about not being able to remember the present in exchange for seeing the future. Had time lapsed without me? Heaven and Earth, how much had I missed? Nah, it couldn't have been more than a few days, could it? I better not have said anything stupid. Nevras slowed until he was by my side. Maybe I should just not talk until I was sure what happened, unless I wanted to blurt something out.

We walked down the mountain in silence, with Nevras getting grumpier by the minute. I definitely didn't know what I might have done, so I decided not to look at him either. I slowed down, and looked at the ground instead. He went back to his position in the lead, which was probably for the best. Out of the bushes, a group of goblins popped out.

Now, goblins are bad to start with, since they are stinky, aggressive, and usually pretty stupid. As a result of their curse, they stopped being human, they became a race of insane cultists who were about three feet tall, hunched over, and typically grossly deformed with some having extra limbs or even heads.

I used my new ability to evade attacks, but it was harder than it should be. The goblins had such a random pattern of movement that no sooner did I avoid one attack, then they would double back or leap in some random direction. I hate goblins. I managed to avoid them enough to not get sliced through the gut, but I just barely dodged out of the way in time. Normally, I could read the flow of motion for any natural creature, but perhaps goblins weren't natural. Despite my dodging, they had managed to fan out around me. Even if I could manage to do my dance routine, it would only drain them, not kill them. Urgh... Aside from Elias, the others had yet to notice the ambush and were continuing to move farther away.

NEVRAS

Ambrosia and I had spent the last six months together, yet today there was a marked change in her. I had taken the lead once the terrain eased off, since I hadn't been particularly sure-footed in the snow before, and had almost lost my life. Now that the mountain was largely dry and a relatively easy climb, however, I decided to scout ahead for the time being, but after seeing that Aqorm largely had it under control, I wanted to talk to Ambrosia. I quickly found, though, that she was giving me the silent treatment. She also wouldn't meet my gaze. Had I done something wrong?

She probably wanted to be left alone, so I crept up to the front of the pack again. Aqorm signaled for my attention, "Shh, keep walking what we talk," and so we did. "There is something hiding in these bushes. We could attack it now, but we risk running

into a double ambush if we don't know their numbers. Let's walk ahead and make them think we're out of sight, then double back around." I was curious, so I asked, "What is it? How can you be sure it's not an animal?" Aqorm shrugged, "It doesn't smell like deer or any wild game. Definitely an ambush, though I'm not that good at telling scents apart." Hopefully, it wasn't an orc.

As per plan, we pretended to continue moving until we were certain that all of the goblins had revealed themselves. Even despite having no geomancy now, Aqorm was an above-average fighter. She managed to take down one of the goblins by lunging on top of one and burying a pair of daggers in its chest. She didn't bother to collect her weapons just yet, instead focusing on robbing the nearby two adjacent to the original. Unfortunately, this turned out to a mistake, as this immediately annoyed the goblins. The others each finished off one goblin. Elias blasted one with darkness, turning it into bones.

Ambrosia skirted around another, finally managing to draw her knife and cut one of these goblins down. She didn't seem to have a strong desire to kill it, only to take it out of commission for the battle. Still, her knife skill was impressive, it must've been one of the things Lao Tzu trained her for, because she managed to slice several non-vital areas. The goblin was alive, but would be unable to move. It was time for me to show that I could be helpful too.

GOD

There are many races occupying this earth. There are the humans, those with normal everything, including average talent for thaumaturgy. There are the elves, divided into several distinct groups. Then there were the dwarves, a race of short and stout humanoids who vaguely resembled Germanic people. The men were very burly and all had heavy beards, while the women were simply small pear-shaped women. And yet, the dwarves were extremely strong, with dwarf women able to lift over 500 lb and fight almost as well as their men. They were also resistant to magic on account of their thick skin, and had stomachs strong enough to digest poisons. Next, came the angels, a race blessed by protection against mortal weapons and with the Script, the ability to basically make almost any concept they want exist simply by speaking of it. These were related to the demons, a race not blessed by the use of thaumaturgy (Fallen, strictly speaking are not true demons but corrupted Seraphim) yet immune to most of it besides holy energy, with natural abilities of dark and fire. Angels and demons collectively were called the Nephilim, and were once one race until I separated them. Next were merfolk, those who could swim deep underwater or sprout legs to walk on land. Along with elves and angels, these were the **immortal races**, though merfolk could only stay immortal by a ritual of periodically sloughing away old skin. This is distinct from immortals themselves, those who achieved immortality through effort. These main races were known as the Five Tribes, with the minor races largely being unknown by most. Of course, unless you were underwater or in a cave somewhere, you wouldn't see dwarves or merfolk, and Nephilim stuck to Heaven or Hell. Even elves weren't that common outside their lands, so humans often acted as if they were the only people.

Aside from these main races, there are the changelings, a race most people do not know exists, that have the natural ability to change their form and they can use telepathy by touch. Natural abilities are abilities that are part of the race itself and can function even in areas of antimagic. Then there were the halflings, a race that simply looked like half-pint humans with arms and legs at normal length and width for their size, and with a talent for thievery. Shortest of all were the gnomes, a people gifted with several odd powers such as abilities of illusion and natural ability of talking to animals. Very little is known about them. Some say they are tinkerers, sort of like the dwarves with metalworking, though their inventions don't turn out normally. Others say they are a race of healers. And some people think they are fey or relatives of goblins. Then, there were the djinn, remnants of those from an ancient religion bound to common objects such as rings or lamps with natural ability to grant wishes. There were also the Nezumi who were rat people with strong Exorcism ability, trolls with the natural ability of regeneration, the Slimeborn which were a synthetic lifeform that could kinda ooze under doors and stuff, and finally the Yuki-Onna, the ice people. According to legend, there used to be tree

people with nature powers and a strong connection to a bonded tree, alternatively called either dryads or the Sakuya. But nobody believed they existed anymore, and the forests were ravaged with impunity. Most of these formed such a minority population that one was unlikely to see one per town.

Aside from races, there were the creatures, beasts of the natural world like medusas, owlbears, and trolls. Creatures refers to created species, which is why it was bad form to call a medusa a "monster," they are hatched from eggs like all snakes, it's not their fault they look as they do. Medusas have families, carry out fairly normal lives, and occasionally date humans provided they wear glasses and such. It is important to remember that while not all creatures earn respect, all creatures are capable of decent lives, so they must be treated according to how they as a people act. The orcs, for instance have never acted as anything but brutal savages, so fuck them.

Other than the races and the creatures, there are those known as Monsters. These were false creations, imaginary beings formed by that other than me. The older and more well-known they got, the greater the chance of becoming Elder Formless. Urgh, the thought disgusts me. Such *things* could not even be called Elder Beings (though humans did), for they were not alive. Most of these had a form only by possessing living things, and until then, mostly existed as Shadows. Should they manage to touch a living thing, even a goldfish, well... there is a reason they are called Monsters. That tiny goldfish would become enormous, and resemble something out of a Vladimir Kush painting. The Elder Formless and the Monsters had a strong aversion to my Creation, so any First Material, even something innocuous like First Milk, were like deadly poison to them. These beings were dangerous precisely because of the belief of living things. They saw them and immediately believed in a Rival Power, a force that filled them with fear, and made them believe they were outside of the territory of God. Such a thing is impossible, mind you, for such things as Elder Formless or Monsters have no real presence in this universe, yet it was a persistent feeling of fear. In fact, such fear is real enough to physically destroy the weak-hearted.

In actual fact, Elder Formless and Monsters were not real at all, but the product of runaway imagination. When humans wanted a balanced world rather than a perfect one, I gave them thaumaturgy, but along with this came fears sometimes taking form as Shadows. Left alone, these Shadows became Monsters, and Elder Formless were simply Monsters that had grown over time. Yog Sothoth and Cthulhu had been read about in so many books, there were people who believed them to be real. Of course, anyone with a strong amount of faith could simply disbelieve in them.

Likewise, some creatures like orcs, ghouls, and goblins, were dangerous because they had a minor Rival Power. The orcs were creatures manufactured by science as soldiers. The Rival Power of orcs was Rage, they could increase their strength to a frightening degree, and the more afraid people were of them, the bigger and stronger they got. The ghouls were a symbol of the frightening nature of the Void itself, and possessed the Rival Power of Rejuvenation, allowing them to come back again and again. Goblins were descendants of those who had followed Ungorr and had been cursed by me. Although I had destroyed many of the followers of Ungorr, and had taken away their immortality, that such beings continued to exist at all created a Rival Power of Doubt. The greatest ability of a goblin was its ability to cause humans to lose faith in their own abilities. All it had to do was speak, and the person could be completely demoralized.

CHAPTER 5

Ummmm, Leeroy Jenkins. In which everyone dies because Ambrosia is stupid.

NEVRAS

I advanced towards the goblins, intending to use my Jump Slash to take all of them out at once. All at once, one of them spoke, "You're weak. That sword is too heavy for a weakling like you." I couldn't seem to hold the sword up. I kept trying but it felt like the sword I was hold had suddenly turned to lead. The others joined in, "You're worthless. You'll never be able to attack us. You can't even stand." My legs gave out next, and the

goblins marched forward, if their odd random walk could be called a “march.” I raised my hands to defend against attack, but they too felt heavy. Maybe they were right...

Aqorm rushed forward at full speed, brandishing her knives and facing the nearest goblin. The words stopped her short, “And you, you're a klutz. You'll never hi-” of all things, the goblin was cut off mid-sentence by its own poor choice of words. Aqorm did indeed trip and collapse into a heap, but through sheer dumb luck, the knives flew out of her hand and embedded themselves in the goblin speaking. Unfortunately, when she tried to stand and collect her knives, she fell. She muttered, “I'll just crawl to them...” No sooner did she try, than she flopped on the ground. How did someone trip while already on the ground?!?

Elias, on the other hand, didn't seem to have any problems with this effect. They did their worst, but he seemed to shrug it off with some effort. I would have to ask him how he did this. On the other hand, after blasting three goblins to smithereens, multitasking with support prayers, including fast-healing prayers, he was quickly running out of power.

“Elias, quick! How are you shrugging that effect off?” I asked. “I'm not sure you'll understand it. I love myself, just as I love all others. All reality is a mirror, and since I would have no reason to insult myself, these insults cannot be real,” he said after a fashion. He was right, I didn't understand. “Ummm, I'm not sure I can do that on the spot.”

Only two goblins were left, but it looked like everyone but Ambrosia was useless. And she wasn't much good at figuring out how these creatures moved. The goblin rushed forward, only to weave oddly to the side at the last second. She just barely managed to stumble out of harm's way, and lightly whacked the goblin on the shoulder. Immediately, the goblin committed suicide, slashing itself up in a brutal way. Ambrosia looked more than a bit puzzled. “What... what just happened?”

Elias explained, “I forgot, you folks don't know about goblin psychology. Goblins used to be immortals. They had endlessly long lives, but they could still feel pain. They **hate** pain more than death. By the way, that goblin you knocked out, Ambrosia.... You're gonna need to chop its head off or it'll be berserk when it wakes up.” Reluctantly, she did so. You could tell Ambrosia hated the idea of any violence beyond hunting.

The last goblin was enraged. Not so much afraid, as goblins don't seem to have the same sort of fear as humans, but extremely upset that one of its allies actually was *hurt* instead of killed outright. It took one look at Ambrosia, and decided to seed some Doubt on her too. The last goblin told her, “You'll never be able to attack me. You can't handle that knife, or that fishing pole. And you won't be able to dodge this attack.” He circled around her, slashing at great speed. I had seen this before, it was the ultimate goblin attack, the Fan Strike. One or more goblins would run around a target while striking, cutting their prey into ribbons. The more goblins were involved, the more of a bloody mess. The fast footwork of the goblin began to kick up dust. I could see the outskirts of the circle, with the goblin breathing hard. It had finished its race. The dust completely obscured Ambrosia, but I shuddered to think of what her body would look like after this.

The goblin gasped for air after its exertion. This was the ultimate technique of goblins, short of them inventing a new one, and just the same, a goblin needed to be in peak shape to pull this off. The goblin coughed from the dust, and tried to catch its breath again. But it wasn't to be. The goblin was suddenly given a gaping hole in its lungs, as a knife stuck though.

I blinked. A line of long thread wrapped the goblin, and I saw Ambrosia emerge as the dust finally cleared, holding firm to her fishing pole. She tossed a frying pan at the goblin's head, and its body suddenly went limp. I looked at Ambrosia. Not only had she not appeared to be affected by the Doubt effect, but unlike Elias who managed with effort, she didn't even appear to have noticed anything had happened. Who *is* this girl? “What's wrong with you guys? A little bit of trash talk, and you all collapse.” Ambrosia helped Aqorm and me up. Strangely, the effect of the Doubt seemed to have worn off more quickly than normal. Usually I had heard it was supposed to last weeks. We walked down the mountain, in preparation to board a ship.

YAZIM JIANNE

I had chosen this location for its secrecy. Many years ago, my wife Sarai and I had researched several locations in order to proceed with my experiments, and to attract no attention with the... proper authorities. This island was ideal. It was in the middle of the ocean, it was coarse and uninhabitable, it had a flat plateau that was suited for summoning, and it was difficult to get to my current location without either being a master climber or having an excess of mystic power. I had to use a Mystic Sphere, against what most wonder-workers would do. Basically, the analogy for understanding magic is that it's like covering the Earth with leather instead of just wearing boots. A transformation into a flying creature had less upkeep than trying to constantly resist falling and protect against injury. I had no choice, since there were crosswinds enough to smash even the toughest bird into a wall. Even attempting teleportation or a Gate would have been out of the question since this area already had a latent portal, and trying to get there this way risked opening it. To use this effectively, you had to either have an absurd amount of mystic power, or be insane enough that you thought humans could naturally fly, making this hopeless for the average thaumaturgy user.

I was not most people. I am a powerful sorcerer and not afraid to use any means to achieve my goals. And I was okay with believing or doing anything necessary, as was Sarai when she had been around. Making a floating sphere of magic was simply a matter of changing what I thought was possible.

Of course, the way that sorcery works greatly helps. Sorcerers do not even use mystic power in the same way, they instead have tiers of magic. That is, very simple spells are easy to use many times per day, while something like the effect above I would have need significant power to use even once or twice per day. These tiers aren't connected though, after using nothing but upper-level magic, I still would have a smaller spells set aside.

There was a third path up the mountains, which did not involve reckless risk of life. I noticed when I came there was a mark on one of the rock walls of the plateau that resembled the Oracle of Tao's Trigram tattoo. From research, I concluded that the sign meant that this could only unlock if the trigrams were fully lit. It wasn't happening. The last Oracle of Tao was thousands of years ago. And yes, there were other Oracles, but even if they managed to gather together, they lacked the key component, the Crest tattoo. Nothing would stop my plans! Mwahahaha!!!

Ahem. Sorry about that. I tend to get carried away sometimes. As I say, I have other lairs, like my undersea lab, my mansion, and the one built directly underneath the town of Opening near the grave... never mind that one. We built it when she was still alive, but... I never visit that one anymore. Not since the accident happened there. This location is ideal not because it is specifically suited for experiments (in fact, given the difficulty of transport for heavy equipment, it was terrible for this purpose), but for summoning and spells too dangerous to be tested elsewhere. It was time to summon him.

Unlike the materials for some of my inventions, a summoning could be done with simple ingredients. My Zoroastrian faith meant I believed in a deity, Ahura Mazda and Ahriman, although right now the latter had dominion over my life. Zoroastrians were the first to believe in free will, and the ability to choose good or evil. I was knowingly choosing evil, for I would do *anything* if it would give me my wife back.

Sorcery, or as sometimes is called Onmyodo, is not like typical thaumaturgy. I do not pray for my spells, they come as a result of my knowledge of the universe. As a result, my magic is able to do things which would seem impossible for the standard wonder-worker to do without direct intervention from God. Things like creating holes in space, stopping or rewinding time, or making ripples within the laws of matter. If I wished to, I could clearly bring her back myself, but it would change the time-space network to such an extent that other events would alter. Plus, I'd probably wind up killing myself trying that.

Rituals demanded strict attention to detail, or they would fail. First, there was the urn, which I always carried on my back, ever since I unearthed it. The urn was key to my plans, for without the urn he was sealed inside, he could not even be summoned. Next, there was the presence of at least one key. When I say “keys” I do not mean keys made

from metal for unlocking doors, but small crystals. When all 13 keys are held, I can focus the light reflected by the crystals to unleash the shadow inside the urn, which will release Belial's body and soul. Currently, I had collected six of the keys, which was nevertheless enough to summon quite a powerful being. I spread black salt gathered in a pouch in a rough circle around the urn, laying the crystals in formation. I finished by lighting some special candles made from beeswax and bee venom.

"*I summon thee!*" I called out. This was a departure from my standard sorcery spells, which often involved foreign words to protect their use by others. Simple words yes, but unlike other forms of summoning which possibly some unseen help from God in the casting of the effect, a demon summoning generally did not have any help, making it have a very high chance of going very, very wrong. Such a demon can do all sorts of things like attack, mess with my mind, or even cast curses. I would have no way of knowing the summoning was wrong, until it was too late. With great difficulty, I managed to call forth the Fallen. I could feel a palpable sense large enough to create a headache. At the moment, if someone asked me anything, even the most basic math question, I would not be able to answer easily.

I addressed the Fallen. Belial was more or less an incorporeal mass of darkness with largely indistinguishable features, a giant black cloud with eyes. Believe it or not, this was much more clear of an image than when I first summoned him. For quite some time, I had been forced to address what was basically a loud booming voice. I chanted over and over, "Demon Belial! May power from these keys flow into your spirit!" I could see the light from the crystals pour energy into its body. The Fallen still resembled a cloud, yet somehow he seemed more solid now. Belial spoke in a voice that oozed with a raspy tone, "**You have done well my servant, but keys still remain before I am free. Seek the rest quickly and I shall reward you greatly. You shall have all that you deserve!**"

I caught the faintest hint of a smirk, yet I paid it no mind. Soon, all of my plans would come to fruition. They said I was mad. They said I was mourning my wife, and my experiments would just lead nowhere. What about my advances in esoteric medicine? What about my experiments with the creation of chimeras and flesh golems, and use of spirit transference? Well, we'll see who's mad when I show them the success of my project. They'll see, when I bring a woman who is dead back to life.

What's that? Revival is already being done by priests? Nonsense! Everyone knows that the person who is raised gets pulled away from a totally decent Afterlife. My experiment is different. I want to use a Fallen to create an artificial soul and transfer it into a construct built to resemble her. It's obvious this will let me enjoy her company forever while still allowing her real soul to rest in peace. I had managed to build a patchwork lifeform in her exact image and with the inscription of her name on her forehead. Soon, all that will be required is to add a soul. "So, my dream will be granted? She will come back, right?" The demon Belial answered, "**I promise on my honor as a demon to grant any wish I am capable. Now go!**" Good, good, obviously a being of his power could create souls.

GOD

I would not want you to be deceived, dear reader, and have false hope for Belial's promise to copy a soul. Souls come about by a very specific path, and neither demons nor angels can create one, even a copy of one. I feel sad for Yazim Jianne, until I remember that the way his wife died was well within the means of a standard cleric to revive. Even so, he cannot be wholly blamed for his ignorance or insanity. Humans are flawed after all, as am I.

There are many things of the Creation that are attributed to me. But as I said before, most aspects of reality are governed not by me, but by the Reapers. This is not to say they're more powerful, I just decided to delegate many tasks. Reapers form the objective background of reality, as well as the subjective bits like free will and the ability to perceive events as better or worse than they were. This subjective portion can alter a great deal, such as how hot or cold it is outside, or the creation of thaumaturgy, yet there are certain objective constants, such as how old the universe is, what flows inside humans is blood and not milk or molten steel, and ontological inertia (that people do not stop

existing when one person leaves the area).

I only actively do two things on a regular basis (aside from miracles): design new creations to be implemented by my Reapers, and put my essence into each soul. Oh, do not worry! My essence is infinite. All of you people worried about overpopulation can rest easy, for no matter how many humans walk the Earth, I can simply make more plants and animals. If anything, it is human mismanagement that has caused most of the problems. Not even my most powerful Reapers can create a soul, all that they can do is incubate it.

A soul begins based on the model of an egg. It is pure potentiality that has yet to activate. In the beginning, after I created Light, and the Reapers helped me create known existence, there was a large Crystal. This Crystal represented all souls that would ever be, as a whole. It was me that I created in potentiality *after* I already existed. Yes, I understand if you readers have a headache.

I split this Crystal into an infinite number of pieces. Each crystal shard either is given to the Reapers to become *jiva* (living) soul or I plant in the Earth to become an *ajiva* (nonliving) soul. Ajiva souls grow underground, and become rock or crystal formations. These designs permeate existence until writers, artists, and engineers work them into finished products. Others become Designs for living things themselves. At one point, for instance, the Design for the dodo bird arose from a mature crystal. The Design is still there, and I could make dodo birds walk the Earth again. Yeah, let's do that, right now! The *jiva* soul is given to the Reaper of Birth, Seishi. She occupies the Afterlife, and does two major things. She allows souls that wish to reincarnate to become dormant, and gives them to the Reaper of Afterlife, Rinne, who delivers those to the Six Paths. Seishi also minds the Well of Souls, planting crystal shards within it. New souls, when they "bloom" are likewise sent into the Six Paths. Then there are souls that through revival or necromancy, are given a place to go besides the Afterlife, and are brought back to life without entering the Six Paths. Finally, there are souls that have become enlightened, and as such, remember their life even after entering the Six Paths. I will not take this from them, even if it causes hardship. So when I suspect a soul will be revived, I give them four days.

Hmmm. I've mentioned the Six Paths at least two times without bothering to explain it. The entire universe is based upon three models: the Desire Realm, the Form Realm, and the Formless Realm. The Formless Realm is roughly composed of places like the Unseen World, the Afterlife, and the World Beyond All Things. It is the area before things are created, so it is possible to make everything, that which is closest to the Void. The Form Realm, is the area where all created things are in their purest form, and mostly involves the First Universe. This is where First Material comes from. When I split the Earth, I had to combine the Form Realm and the Formless Realm into one place to make the Realm of Void, and I may have wound up messing with things by accident, as now anything that enters slowly gets erased. The Desire Realm is what humans call the Six Paths. All living things are subject to the Six Paths or Six Domains of *samsara*, the cycle of rebirth. In order of progression from best to worst: **Deva** (all of the greater immortal races and also the fey and kami spirits, they typically are gifted with an everlasting life, but if killed they are typically reborn as Human or Animal path), **Human** (also includes half-elves and dwarves), **Animal** (this includes the Hengeyokai and Nezumi), **Ashura** (these are lesser immortal things such as demons, lizard people, and those who spend their lives jealous of what others have), **Hungry Ghost** (the state of being an undead, or constantly wanting flesh or blood or brains), and **Niraya** (I'd call it Hell, only it's different from Hell that exists on this Earth). It is important to note that Hungry Ghosts actually come from two places, those drawn from (sometimes by necromancy, sometimes by escaping) and those whose souls are filled with unresolved desire. Necromancy will not work on anyone who has made it to the Deva, Ashura, Animal, or Human paths, but it may still work on their body. It is also important to note that Exorcism actually helps the Hungry Ghosts return to the Six Paths as humans, thought they typically lose their memory in the process.

Even if I wanted to help him, a copy soul is impossible. Each soul is unique, and each soul upon arriving into the New Earth, develops a certain way based on nurture. Similar

souls are called soulmates, but to have an identical soul would require not only exactly the same crystal and the exact same incubation. The exact same soul? Nah. The most even a Fallen can do is a false soul. He would be creeped out by one of those.

As it is, revival can do only certain things. It cannot bring back a person whose body is rotted, who has died of old age, or whose body is destroyed. This is why so many graves exist, those involved tend not to have the means to keep the body from corruption. As a miracle, I can create a brand new body for a soul, but this is a rare event. Why then does it seem like revival is easy for adventurers then? Simple. Since I favored their quest, their bodies would not rot and were able to be revived as many times as it took.

AMBROSIA

As we headed back toward the town of Shoten, I saw an odd looking flightless bird. I had no idea what it was, but it was strangely cute. Whatever. Once in town, we made our way to the dock. Along the way we stopped at the priest. I immediately went to the priest and confessed everything I did so that I could be saved. The priest assured me that this sort of thing wasn't necessary, they only needed to approach and ask to be saved. The dock looked pretty shabby, almost like there would be the same area for every town. The sandy beach nearby, the shabby and half-baked looking dock, and the boat that looked freshly-painted (and not in a good way)... yes, I was certain that I would see this scene for weeks to come. There were very few people hanging about.

I saw a girl with a formal suit, wearing dark glasses. I assumed she must be a former government agent, because very few women adopted this particular look by choice. Did she perhaps work for the Council? After talking with her for awhile, I found out that in a distant island called Dragon Island, there was a cave filled with snow and ice, where a large dragon used it as a location to cool off and relax. She spoke of its wondrous ability to fly, and how it would be useful to get around. Which was great, but not much help to me right now since I only had a small amount of money, and a ticket to someplace else.

I saw a guy who looked a cross between a pirate and a ronin samurai. “Arrrgh, matey-san, *domo arigatou* for ye being here. Will ye be taking a skiff?” said he. He was sitting near a ticket vending table... okay, so maybe it was actually a wooden crate. But he was using it well! I knew I wanted to eventually give him my ticket, but well... there was still so much to see. I told him, “Maybe in a bit,” and walked away to explore the dock some more.

To the north end of the dock, there stood some guy who looked like a noble. He had some sort of elaborate outfit that... why did I suddenly believe Nevras would know what this was called? Nevras was a common foot soldier, after all. Anyway, it was some kind of blue coat with loads of buttons, an outer jacket, and some matching blue pants. He appeared to have some sort of white stockings underneath. It looked like he was wearing Neo-Renaissance fashion. He spoke unto me, “Greetings, milady, dost thou wish to purchase a vessel this fine day? It shall be only 900 thousand sovereigns of fine Gold.” I thought about it, and then spoke the words that no party of adventurers wants to hear. “Leeroy Jenkins...” Aqorm and Nevras went wide-eyed, “You don't mean...” Elias, for once, was completely out of his depth, “Who or what is Leeroy Jenkins?” He had not heard the *legend*.

I approached the man before anyone had a chance to speak, and I told the man, “We will take your ship, but for only 9000 Gold. If you refuse, we'll just have to beat you up!” The noble frowned, “I see. Well, in that case, *Leviathan, I summon thee*!” From beneath the waves, a massive form emerged. With a large splash, a sea serpent rose from the depths. It sucked in water, and spat it out like a cannon, knocking Elias into the water and out cold in the same action. It whipped its tail, destroying most of dock except for the where the summoner stood. That was to be expected when summoning all creatures other than demons. It was part of the Pact, after all. Aqorm fell into the water just before I did. Nevras held on to the dock only to get slashed up by its unreasonably large claws. Aqorm got swallowed whole. While it circled around me, a whirlpool sucked me under. My last thoughts before everything went black forever were, *Maybe this wasn't as good an idea as I thought...*

GOD

I promised to preserve their body against decay if only part of the ground died, so they could easily be raised. And I promised that should the entire group die, I would reset time to the last safe point they had arrived at. But... Me damn it, Ambrosia, did you seriously have to do something so stupid?!? ***Reset****,* I said with a groan. Something told me I may wind up doing this a few more times.

AMBROSIA

"What in the Nine Wastes, Ambrosia?!?" Aqorm shouted. Honestly, after I looked around, I was a bit pissed off too. I understood why it was important to be saved by a priest, as many times as possible. I was thankful that we had indeed saved here, or we would be trudging down that horrible mountain again.

The ship ride was pretty uneventful. Aside from the fact the ship seemed to move like it was on rails, and jerk ahead like it was switching places with another object, which was causing my stomach to heave, I can't say it was much different from any other boat ride. We arrived in the town of Ghobli.

I could immediately tell that this town was subtly different from Opening. First, there were no walls or guards. Ultimately, set against that sort of standard, I guess everything after that is a wonderful town. If I had to say, I'd guess this town either had no government at all to collect taxes, or made all of their money from tariffs or sales taxes, because I immediately noticed the outdoor stands that lined the streets. In terms of being a "town" it kind of failed, because it looked like there were less than ten houses scattered about, but in terms of being a center of commerce, yeah, it was awesome. To the west, I found a strange stone tablet. To the north, there was a large inn, and to the east, the town disappeared into forest. It appeared to only be for visitors, leaving it unclear just where the townspeople actually lived. The entire town seemed maybe 5 acres or less. We read a stone tablet that said that gravestones shouldn't exist before 4000 AD, despite seeing some in Opening graveyard. I had to get an explanation about this from Elias, who told me that some stuff did survive from the old Earth.

Every town hereafter, we decided to be saved, as there was no sense retracing the steps. Next, it was time to check out the shops. "Hmm, this town is nice! Let's go shopping!" I said. "We should also find a place to eat and stay for the night," Nevras added. Odd, we had just rested on a ship the whole way... I asked, "Why is that?"

Nevras explained, "We don't know where to find these Crests, so we won't be able to help until we figure something out. Having somewhere to rest would give us time to do that. Plus, I'm kinda hungry." Aqorm scoffed, "Typical, always thinking with your stomach, Nevras." She was right of course. Nevras's metabolism was incredible. If I ate like him, my hips and butt would be huge. But she was hardly the person to make that comment, as Nevras noted, "Ummm, Aqorm, you really shouldn't talk." Elves and even half-elves had basically ideal bodies. They didn't seem to gain weight, like ever, because of their metabolism. They just kept getting faster and such. Aqorm was *always* hungry. Elias snickered, and then all of us did. After apologizing to the glaring half-elf, we all entered the inn.

We gathered around the table. The area inside was solid wood walls and no plaster or paintings, stone floor with no carpets, and a small room off to the side for sleeping. For a building designed to provide comfort, it was pretty bare-bones. The door was locked, so we paid the lady near the kitchen. "One room for the four of us, and a dinner, whatever you're best at cooking," Elias ordered. She was in reasonably good shape, and it was obvious that her specialty was fire and water elements given that she was now steam-spitting a turkey, and given her high mystical ability, she had probably been doing this for years. I didn't understand how the process worked, so I'll let Elias talk.

ELIAS

Typically, back in the older periods, the tradition was to bake turkeys, and it was done by a formula of weight, which was ridiculous, since the turkey came frozen, took four days to thaw, or more for a heavy bird. External heat ensured the bird meat either was black and blue - being very done on the outside but dangerously raw on the inside, that it had completely dried out from hours of cooking, or needing to constantly micromanage with a baster. The invention of using thaumaturgy meant that new methods of cooking

could be developed.

One of the many oddities of virtually universal magic (except mainly from the Blessed, atheists, and a few small groups with magical oddity), is that any random person nearby can negate a prayer. This puts a damper on the ability do anything, so people tend to be somewhat civil, so as to not find themselves without any abilities due to constant veto. Another is that magic tends to be much like the science of old, with everyone knowing how to do the basics. Complicated stuff, on the other hand, that takes skill.

Steam-spitting is the process of steaming while on a spit, as the name clearly implies. It involves what are called continuing prayers, that is, normally when I use a prayer, it sounds like I just call out *"Light!"* or "*Dark!*" and this is all that happens, but this is actually a shorthand for the real prayer. The Light prayer, for instance is, "*Bring radiance to this target, great God of holiness. Let that thing which is separate be revealed for the illusion it is.*" The prayer was maintained by the words added to the end of it, "*Let God watch over this, as I continue to act.*" The mystic power was then unavailable to the user until they negated the prayer. But not all prayers could be used in continuing prayer form, some weren't designed that way, and others bound up so much energy that they were impractical. A continuing prayer was always said in its full form, and was designed to last until the user stopped it. This was different from an enchantment, which was permanent change and involved runes.

Steam-spitting involved the continuing prayers of Moisture Shield, Protection From Fire, and Flame Roasting. This allowed the drippings to stop falling at the edge of the barrier in order to return as steam, and then a spit was inserted. The second effect prevented the wood from being consumed, and the third kept the heat high while the cook did other things. This cooking style that was precisely so difficult because it involved keeping all of these effects in constant activity, yet the results were tremendous. The outer skin was crispy, yet the inside was at the same time done and completely moist.

The most useful books of thaumaturgy was actually not *High Magic*, *Learn Magic in 12 Days or Less*, *Forbidden Prayers and Spells*, or even the necromancy book *Soul of the Dead*. They were three books, *Common Prayers for All Religions*, *Arcane Metallurgy*, and above all, *A Quick Guide to Magical Cooking*. When most of the population could make up prayers on the spot to work towards their needs, there was ironically a great lack of knowledge on the higher techniques. They knew how to ask for help, but they didn't understand the more meaningful things. For example, aside from priests and scholars, blacksmiths, and cooks, the average person knew prayers or spells but nothing at all about the theory of the elements, simply seeing a prayer or spell as one thing, not as part of a larger whole.

In terms of cooking and for understanding the elements in general, there were 5 elements and 4 others: fire, water, earth, wood, air, then Void, cosmic, light, and dark. These elements, being part of the user's will, were free of good and evil, meaning it was only once exposed to a target that it affected matter. This subdivided into hybrids: steam, mud, ice, lava, smoke, and lightning. Wood tended to react to other elements rather than mix, and the other four would not blend at all. Wood was useful for fermenting food especially since it tended to help bacteria/fungi/algae grow, while dark would rot food. Light was usually for preserving or cleaning food. Earth was good for creating containers for potting meat or vegetables, or making quick stone tools. Void was almost useless for cooking, as it removed matter; it could be used to suck out internal organs, but it took tremendous skill to avoid erasing the food. Cosmic energy was what was called nuclear energy, and they'd stopped using microwaves after they saw it caused issues like radiated food. All the same, some cooks still learned how to use this, just as some cooks liked to fry even though that wasn't healthy either. The major types of mystical cooking were: the aforementioned steam-spitting (effective on poultry that was thick), electrostatic (cooking using direct electricity, which was effective for cooking stews since it conducted well on water), and aether-roasting. The aether was a master-level elemental technique, formed by blending the five major elements together. It was also called needfire (or Druidfire, due to its wide usage in ceremonies among Druids), due to its ability to exactly respond to human desire. It could cook, freeze, or anything else the user desired. Aether roasting was prized for its ability to correctly cook several types of foods mixed together, but

given that this was an extremely difficult technique, foods made this way were considered a delicacy. It was also a delicacy because food cooked by this method was said to leave an emotional impression of the user on the taster, sharing random memories and feelings. For example, if the cook was feeling sad, those tasting the meal would start crying. While I would have loved to see this, the dish we were about to eat was already quite impressive. It's too bad I can't cook like this. My elemental affinity is very bad, and I cannot cast such prayers myself without using far more mystic power than I normally use for healing or light/dark magic.

Cuisine has also changed considerably over the years. Back in the day, there was *service à la française* (which involved bringing everything at once) and then *service à la russe* (courses one at a time with a set menu). The latest method is *service à la simplicité* (literally, "service in the style of simplicity"). There was no longer any real distinction between the waiter and the host and the chef. And there was also no class distinction between the server and the served. The waiter/cook was a professional after all, and good at what they did. They were paid living wages, were tipped as well, and sometimes invited to sit and eat with customers. Menus were obsolete, instead listing the specialties of the restaurant, not the total of all meals that could be ordered. That is, it was totally acceptable to ask a waiter in a restaurant specializing in seafood to make fried eggs or Chinese food. They might fail, but it was okay to order this. All this required training as high as a medical doctor to master all sorts of dishes.

Along with the turkey, she had made dressing, a sweet carrot soufflé, green bean casserole, and mushrooms sautéed in turkey drippings. We sat it our places gaping at the meal. It was time to cut the bird. Aqorm spoke up, "So, let's start off this dinner right. Here, I'll cut the turkey." This was most definitely *not* happening. "Oh no, you don't," I said, "you'll eat half of it, and stuff the rest in your clothes." Aqorm looked wounded for a second, as I had used what I know about her against her. I imagined conversation might be strained, but then her face relaxed, settling in a look of mild displeasure, "Hmph." I turned to Nevras, "Will you do the honors, please?" Nevras responded, "Sure thing!"

Moving gracefully towards the bird, he took the carving knife, and showed his years of fighting experience, creating equal slices of meat which he portioned out, as we discussed plans. "Here you go, guys," he said. Ambrosia took a bite and said, "Mmmm, delicious! I've never had anything like that on the streets." Nevras glared at her, "I thought you didn't want to talk about that." Ambrosia shrugged, "I guess I decided they ought to know about my past." She told about her past experiences, a conversation that they believed Aqorm and I had largely missed while walking off. Aqorm's face told otherwise, so I suspected her sharp ears had probably caught this conversation already.

We brainstormed plans. Aqorm asked, "Do we have any leads on where these Oracles are?" Ambrosia shrugged, "I don't know this area, I'm from Galaxia originally, so I don't know anything this far west." Nevras volunteered, "I suppose we could go to Phoenix and ask my parents for help." Ambrosia asked, "Why, who are your parents?" He turned cold in regard to her, and began to look away.

I suddenly noticed how awkward the conversation got, so I spoke up, "Okay, guys, the mood has gotten a little **weird**. Who wants seconds?" Ambrosia and Nevras mumbled, "Sure..." Aqorm, on the other hand, excitedly yelled "**Sure!!!**" She just was trying to distract the other two from themselves. What a sweet girl!

Ambrosia turned to Aqorm, "By the way, Aqorm, you never told me about how you became a thief." Aqorm blushed briefly in embarrassment, responding, "Well... My family wanted me in business, and I wanted to be a musician! But after a couple of weeks playing and not having people pay me for my music, I realized I wanted to get my money a bit faster..." She paused, and blushed some more then lowered her voice to a whisper, "That, and my playing was bad. Anyway!" Ambrosia asked, "Either of you have embarrassing personal histories, or can we get back to planning?" Nevras had already told his story, but apparently Ambrosia had forgotten it. He scowled at her. My own story was not interesting, just years in the library studying with several old scribes. A long silence followed. "Okay... all in favor of moving on?" We all said, "Aye."

Nevras briefly broke from his black mood to join the conversation, "So, what do we know so far?" Ambrosia spoke from her experience, "Well, let's see, after spending

awhile on the streets, I suddenly got chosen to become an Oracle. God said I needed to find Crests somewhere." Nevras smirked, "You gotta admit, if we told this story to anyone, they'd think you're nuts..." Nevras continued, "But we all saw what you did with that Oracle Delphi, and again with the cat. Hallucinating is one thing, special powers are another. But we might all be crazy." She seemed to accept this explanation, "I guess, the reason it most sounds like a delusion is, why me?" I could see the anguish on her face, so I spoke up, "Maybe God sometimes picks ordinary heroes." This was the results of my reading, I had observed stories of heroes from all backgrounds. It was strange how Ambrosia seemed not to react to this at all. Nevras seemed to be undermining her quest, yet she didn't so much as look sad. She said, "So where would we be likely to find these Crests?" I thought for moment, "Hmmmmmmmmmm..." I said, lingering on the word. "Well, let's see, Oracles aren't likely to be in libraries or palaces." Then Aqorm spoke up, "Could we try the local temples? I mean, these Oracles are like, holy, or something, right?" While it wasn't the only option, this was a good lead. I liked her ability to think of her feet. The others, however, were stunned. They had only ever seen her feign ignorance, in her effort to hide her true age. Everyone stared at her for a second, until Aqorm asked, "What?!?"

I added to her thought, "Typically, though, Oracles aren't in town temples, as they don't like company. They would likely claim it 'interferes with their thinking' and keep well outside the town. We would probably be looking for shrines built on the outskirts instead." Then Ambrosia asked, "So... where can we find some good remote temples that have what we're seeking?" There came a voice, seemingly from nowhere, since we were all staring at Aqorm. "There's one north of town."

We turned to our waitress/chef/innkeeper/probably our maid too, and got a good look at her. She was tall and lean with blond hair that parted easily down the middle. She wore giant earrings featuring a burning snowflake, and a tan dress with dark brown hosiery and a pair of sea blue boots. "I mean," she paused, "...I think there's one there. I haven't visited it personally."

Nevras interrogated her, "Spit it out, where do we find it?" The woman explained, "Well, I don't know much, only that the Mayor of Zuran holds a set of keys to a nearby temple. You should go there and ask to borrow them. I'll clean these dishes." At this point, Nevras and Ambrosia existed the building to have some time alone. I figured that it was only right to follow suit. We had a long chat over the remaining wine, and then decided we had waited enough, so we looked outside.

I asked after them, "You think those two are alright? They rushed out the building." After looking around, I said, "I don't even see them anymore..."Aqorm walked on, "Forget them. You're too serious! Let's go, already!" We continued to walk, wandering out of town for a long romantic walk. Since alchemy and thaumaturgy were still working on it, there were no streetlights. But temporary lights from spells to gather fireflies managed to create more of an impression than the original lights ever could.

AQORM

We talked well into the night, before rejoining the others. What we talked about... is no business of yours, because it is not relevant. So suck it up.

GOD

I shall give you a brief explanation of the curses of the New Earth, as they are slightly different from what you are used to. First off, there are a few terms that have been carried over intact. Shit, piss, fuck, and motherfucker for example are largely untouched by the ravages of time, though people sometimes use more colorful expressions. Others no longer have the same bite to them, for example, bastard is largely meaningless, because while marriages are still valued, Jesus is widely known as a bastard himself, and a marriage is viewed as a union between two willing partners; on the other hand, wife-leaver or wife-beater are viewed as a nasty curse indeed. Words referring to prostitution such as harlot, skank, or whore are largely not used; it was funny, all those lies about feminism and equal rights, but nobody thought to do away with the implication that perhaps it was far worse to be that than a pimp or sex slaver. For that matter, taking my

name in vain was practically never done except by the insane and reckless, because I could call down lightning nearby. If I felt like it, but I was usually too lazy.

So a lot of people, if they had to say stuff, said Heavens no instead of God no, and God damned became Cursed. The term Cursed was a play on Blessed, reasoning the opposite must be true.

Aside from mostly normal oaths, a number of others were around. Some people swore "by the Spirits, by the Nine Realms, by the Six Paths, by the Eight Immortals" these were Shinto, Norse, Buddhist, or Taoist oaths, although they had parodies. Heaven and Earth, was a common one in our Taoist society. Some people would also swear about Emptiness or Void. Some of these were awkward, as the were used in places where people could say, "What the Hell?!?" But people never said that. For you see, aside from those from Hell, everyone else saying Hell as a place on the New Earth, similar to saying "What the Brooklyn?!?" It was a curse that no longer made sense to anyone outside Hell.

Other than this, there were some outright slurs, best not spoken among people you care about. Tainted, for instance, is a slur against atheists, and other people who can't use magic. Calling someone misbegotten meant either there was something seriously wrong with them like a curse or deformity, or perhaps they shouldn't have been born. Pond scum was another term not used in polite company, as with the right of Taoism, nature was a big thing, and it was basically calling them rejects of the natural world, along with the whole pond scum being a low life form.

There were a number of others like heartless (this depends on context, ranging from being a garden-variety jerk to an outright psychopath, basically saying the other person can't feel how they hurt you), halfbreed (honestly, this one is used much because more people don't get offended about being half-blooded), long ears (a slur used against immortals and elves), and longtooth (usually referring to werewolves and vampires, effectively a slur). Soulless meant someone who wasn't going to any kind of Afterlife. And lastly, you had child-killer. Abortion was so poorly favored today that calling someone that was basically a byword for a real scumbag. In fact, it usually was fighting words.

I imagine you will see this section as a sidetrack, but it will be important at some point. Without my explanation, you won't understand the string of expletives to come.

CHAPTER 6

In which Ambrosia goes shopping, defeats a Norse wolfie, and enters a secure city.

NEVRAS

Bloody Hell! We spent six months on that mountain, I told her all about my family. How I was born near the town of Phoenix, as crown prince of Phoenix Castle, and about my parents being King Charis and Queen Victoria (or as everyone called her, Vicky) Phoenix. How I was trained by the legendary swordsman Kurasawa, and learned all of my techniques from him, even though some of them I still have yet to use. How I learned strategy and tactics from the werewolf Blackfang, a dedicated soldier who had run into a nasty bit of luck, being attacked by *valdrserkers,* the 'wolf-shirts'. How could that little... heartless misbegotten bit of tainted pond scum just forget everything like that, like our time didn't even matter? God's blood! Okay, maybe I didn't mean some of that... sorry, God, don't strike me down! But I'm still pissed at her.

I told her more about life in Phoenix and my past than I had to any living soul. And yet... here she was, completely treating what I said as if it weren't worth remembering. And earlier, when I was trying to talk to her, she refused to open up. *Was it all a lie? Maybe I was wrong to open up to her,* I thought as I walked around the streets of Ghobli, such as they were. "Hey." I didn't notice anyone talking to me, until this time they poked my back and repeated, "Hey." I turned around, and was startled by the face of Ambrosia an inch from mine, and fell backward. Geez, didn't she know about personal space?

After picking me up from the ground, Ambrosia asked, "Hey, Nevras, are you okay? You've been quiet most of today, and started glaring at me for some reason. Especially right then, where you seemed to be muttering curses aloud." So I told her, "There's

nothing wrong, I'm fine." Ambrosia stared hard at me, and asked, "Are you sure?" But I couldn't tell her why I was upset. She looked at me, and then walked off. I had to say something, so I just blurted out, "You didn't even bother to remember that my parents were the king and queen of Phoenix! All our time together, and you just treated it like it didn't matter!" Ambrosia's confused face told the whole story. Ambrosia asked, "I'm sorry, I don't remember you telling me this at all. When did this happen?" I had an idea. I asked, "Hey, Ambrosia, how long have we been together?" I was frustrated, but somehow less angry, after she told me, "About three days, I think." I calmly asked her, "Tell me everything that happened in those three days, as you remember it." Ambrosia explained, "We met in the Opening town, went to Shoten, then climbed up Tsukuyomi Mountain where we fought that awful cat, then we walked down, and we fought those goblins. Then we got to town, and I was a dumbass and got us all killed, and God respawned us. Then we took a boat ride on that fake-looking ship, and wound up in this town. Why?"

I told her the truth, "Ambrosia, we were on that mountain six months." This time, it was her turn to jump back in surprise. She gasped, "**Six months**?!?" I responded, "It looks like somehow you forgot the entire time of your training. No wonder I was worried you forgot what I said, not that I blame you now. I guess I can't fault you for what got wiped from your mind," I noted that she also seemed to be upset about something else. I put my hand over her shoulder, "Hey, are you okay?" Her head bowed, and she took a long sigh, "...I'm sorry. It's like you said. Why me? Why did I spend time on the streets, while other people prospered? Why did I have to fight rats and bugs for scraps while some people ruled? Mostly though, I'm jealous. I'm jealous of you... You got a normal life."

It was my turn to sigh, "I've not been able to tell anyone this. Even my parents don't know. How would it look if the crown prince was..." Ambrosia patiently waited, until at last I spoke, "I was born with a sort of genetic issue. One of my fellow soldiers named Komogu had it, but it was far more pronounced with him. I have small junk, small body, and I can't really form large muscles or facial hair. I'll probably never be bald either, but I should be able to have children. He, on the other hand, had breasts and hips, and I believed he might actually be female. Until in the military they had people bathe together... As a child, kids dressed me up like a girl to make fun of me, only... as time went by, I started to like it. I had my royal uniforms and such for anyone to see, but I also began to collect a secret stash of other clothing, makeup, and even accessories." I told her all of this, looking away in embarrassment. She was bound to hate me for being a freak. For toying with her feelings, and getting her hopes up that I was a regular guy. Someone like me couldn't be loved after all. I looked up at her tearful eyes. Of course! She was crying because she would tell me it would never work out. Only Koren had accepted this part of me, and our relationship had been a train wreck. I braced for those words of rejection. Instead, out came both arms of hers, and they encircled my shoulders to my waist, as I felt the weight of her breasts on me. She cried, "You poor thing! I could never hate you for something like that! Let's go shopping." We went back to our rooms to find our bags and our coin-purses, but Elias and Aqorm were nowhere to be found. I wonder what happened to them? Ambrosia started stripping off my clothes. "Wait... what are you...?!?" She smirked as she continued, "If we are going out shopping, then I want you to look the part. After all, we might buy clothes for you too. If you like that. Also, I kinda want to see what Aqorm saw." And so she did.

AMBROSIA

God, he looked hot. But I couldn't possibly doing anything with him, as he was in his unclothed state. We had just met (as far as I was concerned, those six months didn't exist), and I was saving myself for marriage, and ummm, somehow as much as I wanted to, I couldn't help but feel I shouldn't. It just wasn't my nature to act on such feelings. Nope, nope, I was just taking him on a shopping date, and that's that.

We walked outside the door and wandered around food sellers, offering everything from pork on a stick with what smelled like a peanut sauce, to candied apples on a stick, to fried noodles. I refused to let him eat anything. "We mustn't ruin your pretty dress,

Nevrasia~" I said, choosing the closest approximation of a feminine form of his name. He looked at me in shock, yet walked on silence.

We saw some creepy dude in a thick hood, mixing potions over a cauldron. He cackled as he pulled out some jewelry from the boiling liquid. Looking up, he told us as he spread out his inventory, "I am an alchemist. My practice may be dark, but the items that I make are superb!" I saw a solar alarm clock, a death ray, a small clockwork gerbil, a potentiality crystal, and several bits of jewelry made from strange processes. I couldn't afford any of this stuff, even after having sold all of the animal parts from our trip up and down the mountains. Nevras looked over the goods, and saw the anklet. He didn't want to draw attention to himself, so he adopted a cutesy feminine voice, "*May I ask about that anklet you just made?*" The alchemist explained, "This is a Gorgon Anklet. Certain processes, including creature effects like a medusa's glare can cause the organic materials in the body to calcify and undergo mineral replacement, what you might call petrification. The proper word is petrifaction. There are some cures to this, such as the extract of the mandrake which causes the body to metabolize these mineral compounds and form antibodies, breaking them down into essential minerals for nutrition and regrowing organic tissue. Or there's priestly cures, which... well, I'm an alchemist. I don't actually know how that magic works. This anklet reads the genetic code of the subject, halts any cellular breakdown, then proceeds with replacement of organic material on the genetic level using a spring-loaded syringe. Wearing this, you shall never worry if a medusa glances your way! And it's yours today! Only 599.99 Gold!" We only had about 9000 Gold between the four of us, and Elias had taken some of our money. I wanted to buy a special present for Nevras after this. I tried my best sex appeal, which apparently boiled down to puppy dog eyes... but it was not to be. He refused to budge on the price. Then Nevras leaned towards the hooded man, wrapping one arm around his waist and using index finger of the other hand to massage his chest, "*Please~~~ Won't you lower the price? Just for me~?*" The hooded man told Nevras, "Well, I happen to have overstock on these anklets. It's not like anyone buys something tremendously useful in battle, or anything. I'll give you five Poison Armlets, five Gorgon Anklets, and three Echo Rings for that price. Come by later tonight and we'll settle... the second part of your price." Nevras continued with the super cutesy voice, "*Oh thank you Mister! I'll be sure to drop by~~!*" As we left, I asked Nevras, "Are you, by any chance, into guys?" Nevras shook his head, "I saw my sisters using charm to get what they wanted from foreign diplomats at a much higher rank. I asked them to teach me how to act like this." His cute facial expressions turned to that of disgust, "Mark my words, if we can avoid meeting him, we will. I do not want... what he's offering. Let's maybe do some clothes shopping and then head back to the inn and get changed." We headed past rows of stands again. There were people boiling water for *baozi* buns nearby.

"Oh all right!" I said, "but only if you order in that high voice you've been using." I found it incredibly sexy for what was really a boy to be talking like a girl. He did, and we managed to get two buns. The first had sesame seeds on top. We tore it in half, and the inside was a deep reddish-brownish paste that smelled vaguely of beans, only it was sweet. It was... sorta good, but not really my thing. The second was topped with pieces of green onions, and once broken, it revealed a mix of pulled pork with some nice onions in a tangy savory sauce. This, on the other hand, I couldn't get enough of. But the rest of the 9000 was held by the others, and I had spent 600G of the 4000 I held. The buns I would have to hand over another 300G just now. Nevras stopped me, "Wait," and he showed something I couldn't see to the merchant. She was a woman with a long apron and long brown hair in a tight bun, who had obviously taste-tested plenty of her own bao. She kneeled to him, "Prince Nevras! I... didn't recognize you." He said, "Will this do? We will have five more of the pork-onion buns... and one more of the sweet bean buns." We walked on as we ate, although I must admit, I kinda... ate four of the five pork buns. We found a dress merchant, eventually. "I'm selling dresses imbued with runes! Look here, this blue Lilac Dress repels ice, and this one, this Peach Dress does the same to fire," the merchant said. She was a spunky looking girl with short curly hair. The back of her head was more than slightly tangled, and she kept running her fingers through and getting it

stuck. I asked, “How much for each of them?” The merchant said, “Ow- that will be- grrr, 1400 Gold, but let's price it to sell, so... 1100 Gold.” I thought about getting Nevras a present, but I would need a distraction... “Hey Nevras, why don't you change there? I'll go after you.” I pointed to the makeshift changing room to north, constructed a couple of plastic poles, cloth dividers, and a door with a simple padlock. I saw his clothes sliding off, and as much as I wanted to stay and watch, I had to rush if I wanted to get him his gift. I rushed to the other side of the town, ignoring most of the stalls along the path, until finally I caught sight of a weapon and armor shop. “Excuse me,” I said, “but I'd like a shield. Something for... under 1200 Gold, I guess.” He got me a Durasteel Tower Shield with my remaining money, leaving me with just 10 Gold. “*Shunpo Step*!” I heard Nevras call out, as he somehow skipped the distance from point A to point B, and appeared just ahead of me. “Wow, teach me to do that sometime!” I said. But Nevras explained, “I can't, I can only do it once.” So I asked, “You mean once per short rest, or once per day?”

Hours passed, and we had headed back to our hotel, managing to miss the perverted alchemist from earlier. I had changed Nevras out of his clothes, and packed our other stuff. He had especially been impressed with his new shield. After taking that arrow hit, he had been pretty messed up. Having removed all traces of our outing, so as to avoid Elias or Aqorm mocking him (I'm not sure they would, but Nevras needed to feel comfortable), we waited outside for them to come back. I looked out at the moon, “Wow! It sure got dark quickly! Thank you, Nevras, I had a nice time. Let's see if we can find the others.”

ELIAS

After Aqorm and I talked about... whatever topics we wanted to off-screen, and had a generally romantic evening, we returned to see Ambrosia and Nevras in their beds. The large number of paper and bio-plastic (a substance developed in response to waste in the ocean, it was woven from kelp and was edible) bags in the room let me know roughly how long the two had spent buying commercial goods. As there were only three beds, Aqorm initially said that she would stand guard because elves didn't really need sleep; however, once she was convinced that I was fast asleep, she instead crawled into my bed, and started cuddling.

I woke up to her standing guard as before, and pretending as if nothing had ever happened, so I decided not to confront her. Instead, the other two got dressed, and we left town in a hurry. For some reason, both of them decided to wear cloaks and lower their gaze while the urged us out of town. From these observations, I formed a hypothesis that they perhaps did something incredibly sketchy last night. My only hope was that these wronged parties did not call the guard. The guard only had jurisdiction inside their town, but if they were called and failed to find the suspect, they tended to employ bounty hunters. Or ninja assassins. Or both. Unlike ages before, justice wasn't taken into consideration, but instead those sent were supposed to collect what the original client wanted. If they did something wrong, we might be running for our lives until whatever it was became settled.

Permit me to explain. All citizens in this world under the jurisdiction of the Council carry basic identification and/or a passport. Either will suffice, as identification is sufficient to function as a passport, and carved with runes on the back. This detail was largely left out because listing this every time we enter a town entrance would get repetitive, but each town that is part of the Council has a border guard. Usually, they simply check a person's passport, write their name, last residence, and get a thumbprint. While they can stay as long as they wish, if the town guard catches them doing something wrong, they get immediately deported to face justice from their own town. But more often what happens is people commit a crime, and skip town before they are caught. In this case, someone either hires ninjas or the bounty offices are notified. These people hunt down criminals and in some cases dangerous creatures. In the case of ninjas, I have heard they actually use those fingerprints to track the person, connecting their prints to their physical location. This is but one of the reasons ninjas are so feared as assassins.

We arrived in Zuran before nightfall or even the afternoon, despite it being several miles away. The town seemed pleasant enough, but it was (at least on the surface)

extremely generic. There was a weapon shop, an inn and pub, and a clinic. Generic, at least, until one noticed that over half of the citizens were non-human and some seemed to be a breed of extraterrestrials with green skin and big eyes. Until one found out that the weapons shop dealt in cursed weapons. Until one noticed that the houses were built in German half-timber style for some reason, yet using teak instead of the typical spruce, and using military-grade aluminum roofing. Even so, the town was reasonably quiet, and we had learned to shrug off oddity in our travels. Ambrosia bought a fold-up bed for our tent from a black man in town. It's funny, all the time spent protesting for equal rights, forming special interest groups, trying to get support from the government, and you know what actually created equality? It was when people stopped making a big deal about race or discrimination, and just worked hard. Black, white, or even green, it honestly didn't matter anymore. Although, those grey aliens were scum!

AMBROSIA

We entered the mayor's house as per the advice of the waitress/chef. The hut was the same strange yurt-like structure that had been mass-produced in my town of Opening, except that this one was made from metal rather than clay. I finally got to see the inside of such a building. It was completely circular, with shelves and pictures obviously having been tried to be hung (make that “hanged” because what was done here obviously resulted in the death of the object) only to be thwarted by the fact that there were actual round walls. The walls instead were lined here and there with furs, to insulate and cover the fact that this was actually a metal house. A table was placed to the edge of the wall to catch most anything that fell. In the center of the room was an incredibly large man. He was about 8" tall and nearly 300 lb, though it was all muscle. “The mayor is HUGE!” I said, edging for the door. “Run!!!” Nevras grabbed my hand before I could be too rude, though, and turned be around, urging me to talk to this guy anyway. “Ummm... We need to speak to you about something....” His voice boomed, “**What can I help you folks with**?”

I would hate to get this guy angry at me. I cringed, “He's so big, it's just intimidating.” Nevras nodded, “I know.” Aqorm asked, “Did they pick the largest guy in town to lead?” At this point, Elias had enough of our comments. He fumed, “Aqorm and Ambrosia, you're being rude! Show some manners! And some respect, this is the mayor after all.” Elias addressed him calmly, “We would like to ask you about the key to the shrine.” The man exploded, “**YOU DARE**?!?” But, it turned out to be a prank because then he said, “Just kidding, sure I'd lend it to you... Only...” My face lit up, “Oh thank you so much! You don't know what this means to us!” Nevras shushed me with a finger, “Let him finish.” The mayor coughed, “As I was saying, I'd be glad to lend it to you. The trouble is, I...” Aqorm cut him off, “You don't have it anymore, do you? I can usually tell when someone's been robbed. Did you happen to see where they went?” The mayor scowled, “They headed to the forest, over to the east. But you shouldn't go after them. That forest is haunted.” Aqorm scoffed, “Bah. I don't believe in superstition. I only believe in myself.” He explained, “No really, It only appears at nightfall.”

Indeed, when we left town, we saw no forests there. But like clockwork, at slightly past dusk, the area began to waver, and suddenly a forest was there when before there was nothing. Elias commented, “A manifestation from the Realm of Void... is it on both sides?” I had no idea what he was talking about. Slowly, we entered the forest, wary that the forest might disappear with us in it. As we entered we saw an elf with dark brown hair, a blue bandanna wrapped around his neck, and green tunic. He looked kinda badass. He warned, “This forest is a twisted mess. People have been known to get lost in here for years.” Bah. He was obviously just exaggerating.

AQORM

The forest grew in thick clumps, with trees and brambles forming an actual wall against going off the path, the grove opening only in small spaces to the north, south, east, and west. It was if it was allowed to grow freely, yet planned at the same time. Ambrosia walked blindly through the forest, fighting snakes and spiders and centipedes along the way. Whatever powers she had gotten along the way, a sense of direction was not one of them. She headed straight then straight then straight for roughly three hours...

umm straight, even though the landscape was clearly swapping back and forth. I decided to test out a theory. I whispered, "Hey, Elias. Stay here with me. Let those two go ahead." Elias responded back in low tones, "This is too great a risk. We could be left behind forever if this is dimensional or time-space distortion." I whispered back, "Then, let's test it, leave a mark on the ground. If it's a time-space or dimensional distortion, it won't show up again." Elias made a mark on the ground, and as we followed Ambrosia, we noticed it a second time. Elias told Ambrosia and Nevras, "You guys go ahead, we need to check on something." As they walked ahead, after a few minutes, we appeared ahead of them. Ambrosia gasped, "Have we been going around in circles?" I explained, "Not quite. It's... how do I put this … ummm, looped space. When we walk through this forest, we get warped to different areas because the physical area is skewed. Elias, would you do the honors?" Elias made a simple mark "1" for this area on a rock, then "2," and so on. Sometimes, it skipped all the way back to the start, sometimes we managed to find a new area, and sometimes we went backwards. Each area had minor differences in the flora and fauna, in the other landscape such as rocks, stumps, or fallen trees. The path ahead was fairly simple, but because there were four openings, the walk became annoyingly long, until I noticed something.

While in the earlier regions of the forest, we faced any old direction, but now whenever we were warped to an area, our bodies initially faced the direction of the next path, so if I found I was facing left, we should go left. For some reason, the forest seemed to have a fixed perspective, it would not rotate as I turned. This was very unnerving, but as I became used to it, it made maneuvering through the forest simple. The path headed south, and I followed, somehow ending up in the north end of the forest, in a section I had never seen before.

At the end of the forest, stood a woman cheering us on. "You're almost at the end of the forest, keep going." I felt pleased by her praise, until I moved around her and noticed that her eyes had the cloudy appearance of one who was blind. As we walked on, I felt sad for her, so I cooked up some snake meat from before and gave it to her, and ate some of it ourselves. There was still enough for another meal for us, but I knew what it was like being low on resources. At the very edge of this final grove, a thin white mist covered the top of the trees.

The forest gave way to a frozen region. It wasn't a mountain so much as a low plateau scooped out to the side to form a mouth, yet the ice was so slick, even with my special ability to roll with things, all I could do was minimize damage as I crashed into random trees, and was still sliding all over the place. The top of the plateau looked easier to walk upon, but it was blocked by rocks. It was steadily becoming colder by the minute...

GOD

I, the God of Heaven and Earth, who makes all things, made this plateau which was much colder than the land around it, which requires fur coats in an area where most people do not expect. Why? Because human beings need to be tested? Because of a larger plan? No, because woolly mammoths needed to make a comeback. The mouth had high rock walls and boulders to give them plenty of protection from hunters who might somehow wander through the forest while it happened to be visible and make it through the endless maze of spatial warps, and manage to avoid skidding enough to make it anywhere near. My cute lil' mammoths needed a secure place to grow up and nurse their young. So much for that idea.

A group of bounty hunters had just stolen some key and had the raw determination to boost themselves up the wall. The man was tall with deep brownish-black hair, a blue breastplate and gray pants, and a long curved sword. The other one was a dwarf, dressed in brown work clothes, with a green Phrygian cap. Like all dwarves, his body was built like a barrel, and he moved slowly, for dwarves cannot run. He moved without sliding at all on the icy ground, and functioned as an anchor for his ally. Once the reached a point where neither could proceed, the dwarf grabbed the man and swung about, tossing him onto the ledge above. The man, meanwhile, tossed a rope around the dwarf, using the momentum to pull him up. A human, having lesser mass, might have been torn in two through the force of motion, but with the dwarf's firm body he was simply pulled up. And then those two slaughtered my poor babies!

This is why, when Ambrosia and the others came, I had to do something, if only to protect my creation. “讓那裡有梯子,”I said. And there was a ladder, right behind the boulders. I asked Thor for help. All early religions had “gods” that they worshiped but the truth was, all those who humans venerate are simply immortals.

Immortals are humans, demons, angels, or otherwise have cultivated affinity or favored connections. I'm oversimplifying, but basically, if someone becomes strongly connected with a certain concept, they can sometimes achieve immortality, and their power tends to revolve around this concept. This is called their Divine Domain, and immortals have senses relating to these. For example, an immortal of drink like Dionysus immediately knows when someone needs a drink or is having one. And there's two types of immortals, free immortals who independently achieved immortality through their own effort, and those who serve me and govern the natural phenomena.

I could not directly intervene in this event, or risk a *deus ex machina*. Deus ex machina (literally, “god from the machine”) was a specific event, if I were to break my commandments, and act openly without restraint, it would risk robbing humans of free will, or possibly cause reality as we know it to crumble. It didn't matter that humans knew of my existence, in fact, it was all the more important. To put it bluntly, my direct interference could cause things to become artificial. I could come to humans in visions, I could act when nobody was watching (this is how new species were “suddenly” found in remote regions), I could perform miracles but only under very specific conditions, I could send prophets and heroes, and I could answer prayers. But if I did too much, it would cause a mess. Therefore, many of my prayers and miracles were usually subcontracted using angels, immortals, or the Reapers. Any more than this would breed dependence.

“Thor,” I said, “will you aid these humans? They need a hammer. Not just any hammer either...” Thor shook his head, “I will not give them Mjölnir. Not after *last time*.” I nodded. I could see his point. Mjölnir was a powerful hammer, with the power to break stones and cause thunder and lightning. But it could also cause Ragnarok, the Norse apocalypse. We had enough of those for the time being. That wasn't even what he was talking about though. He meant the War of the Seven Fish... no, it's better not to talk about that! “Sindri and Brokkr!” I called, “make us a hammer. One worthy of humans but with the power to put even gods in their place. But remember, you must make it immediately.” Sindri and Brokkr shook their heads, “We can indeed make such a hammer, but it will not be our best work. At the amount of time that you give us, it will last barely a moment of yours. One mortal hour.” The dwarven immortals set to work. I saw them construct together a hammer out of pure will, temper it in fire, and pound it into shape, all within the blink of an eye. These were my experts of the forge, after all. Then they went away, leaving behind only the hammer. Thor picked up the hammer. Unlike his own, this hammer was more like a sledgehammer. His tremendous muscles rippled, and then he launched the hammer in the air, falling like a meteor into a block of ice below.

NEVRAS

“Look out!” I said, pushing the others out of the way. I slid backwards on the ice, while the others skidded straight into a rock wall. I had saved them from a hammer possibly falling somewhat close to them. I could see the gratitude in their eyes. “Thanks a lot, Nevras,” Aqorm called out to me. We slowly crawled to the hammer and read the inscription. «WHOSOEVER HOLDS THIS HAMMER, IF SHE BE WORTHY, SHALL POSSESS THE POWER OF AMBROSIA.» I blinked, then looked at her, “I guess it's for you, then,” and tossed it to her. She obviously wasn't going to catch it, but it stopped in midair before it smashed her in the face, glowed slightly, then lost its light and clattered to the ground. She picked it up, grunted and groaned. I had no idea what the inscription was talking about. The hammer eventually noticed that she wasn't all that strong, and adjusted its size and weight. “Hey guys, watch this,” said Ambrosia, uttering the most common famous last words ever. Thankfully, nobody and nothing was harmed, except for some poor innocent boulders and rock formations. As the path cleared, we noticed there was a ladder behind one of the boulders. Had this been here the whole time?

At the top, our look of triumph turned to horror. There were so many mammoths dead... This was a terrible waste. Whoever hurt these animals would rue the day.

Thankfully, it appeared whoever killed them was merely heading in a straight line and only attacked those who got in their way or who charged, not hunting or salvaging their meat or fur. Yet you could tell exactly where the walking path was by the corpses that lay in their path. I knelt to the ground and studied the bodies. *I see wounds from a sword and an axe, spaced on either side from each other, and there are a pair of footprints of different sizes. These were two different people,* I thought. I looked at the remaining mammoths, standing off to the fringes, cringing in fear while grinding their teeth on the tough mountain grasses. These footprints suddenly scattered. I had no time to consider the reason for this before I understood, for up ahead was the largest wolf I had ever seen.

AMBROSIA

Growing up, I had heard old legends. A giant wolf named Fenrir, who threatened the Earth during final days and stuff that were to come... some time. This was part of one possible scenario of the end of the world, but a bunch of different ones had already happened, so I guessed this was a different one. This didn't look much like him, but neither was this Mjol - Myol - ummm... Thor's hammer. Keeping my knife and fishing pole sheathed, so to speak, I swung this hammer awkwardly around. It appeared that the hammer's power besides brute strength was simply punching a protective hole in all matter, giving us a bubble of protection from his scratches, bites, his roar which threatened to deafen us, his Steel Sand ability which kicked up deadly sharp sand from the minerals extracted out of the earth below us, and his cold wind aura. Elias decided to reserve his magic, preparing prayers ahead of time for if he needed to use them. He was able to cast prayers in rapid succession, but it needed advance preparation. Aqorm used her geomancy to pin the wolf in place with pillars of ice, although the strength of the wolf was so great that even these were showing cracks after only a few moments of struggle. Aqorm was remarkably brave taking on a semi-legendary wolf using newly bought blades made from elven (a silvery metal known for its effectiveness against the supernatural), behind a barrier, and having pinned the wolf. Okay, to be fair, all of us were scared out of our minds. We couldn't exactly tell how strong the wolf was because the barrier was still up, but I noticed the words on the hammer were starting to erase at both ends. It now read, «OLDS THIS HAMMER, IF SHE BE WORTHY, SHALL POSSESS THE POWER OF AMBR.»

Nevras used some new techniques that he apparently had worked on during the six months I remember absolutely nothing of. There was the Pierce technique, which consisted of a charge attack ending in a crouch resulting in an armor piercing attack that caused the target to bleed profusely. This was damaging enough, but then he had also learned the Wave Thrust, a technique that generated a shockwave along the ground in a circle around him. Yet unlike the Jump Thrust, this could not affect anything which did not touch the ground. Of the two, it looked like he spent more time on it. Somehow he had fine-tuned this effect to send out energy only where he wished it, managing to not cut us all into ribbons. To be clear, this wasn't an earthquake, but a pulse of some sort of energy which traveled along the ground. Because of this, it was able to pass harmlessly through us, and avoid shattering the ground it passed along, yet when he gripped harder on the sword, the vibration moved faster, causing the vibrations to burst blood vessels where the wolf stood. A bunch of wounds suddenly formed on its legs and its underside. The wolf was still standing because of its endurance, but getting badly beat up.

I decided to help out, whacking it in the head and body, and managing to just barely dodge its attacks, forgetting for a moment about the barrier. With each hit, its massive body became a touch more wounded, yet the hammer's lettering faded a bit more. It now read, «IF SHE BE WORTHY, SHALL POSSESS» and even as I spoke was fading. I continued to whack at it, Aqorm kept stabbing, and Nevras kept using techniques, while Elias stood back and conserved his prayers. Slacker. The hammer now read «BE WORTHY» and would no longer fade by letter, but it was beginning to become immaterial. The barrier faded, and the the attacks were suddenly felt at full force. The cold aura would have been enough to freeze most of us solid, if not for Elias suddenly quick-casting Protection From Elements from preparation. The claws caused deep wounds to our previously undamaged group, and his teeth threatened to bite us in half if

we did not move out of the way. The Steel Sand was like getting hit by broken glass, and his roar caused our ears to bleed. Elias quick-cast Recover, a prayer he had just learned and followed it up with a third quick-cast, adding Fast Healing to Nevras. That was probably his limit for now. We were all heavily wounded but patched up enough to continue. I knew though the we had only a few minutes before my hammer disappeared, and not much time for Elias to keep healing us with any effectiveness either.

I had to get on top of the wolf, and attack it from there. I looked at Nevras. He was busy fighting the wolf, and truth be told, not much stronger than me. It was all technique, so he wasn't the person to ask to boost me up. Elias was busy healing. “Aqorm! Would you do me a favor?” She cringed as I whispered my plan.

AQORM

It is a literary tradition that plans mentioned in advance tend to fail, but thankfully all of these happened in rapid succession so I will describe it now. I jumped in the air, and did a front-flip followed by kicking Ambrosia hard to propel her forward, then landed on my feet, something which I'm told is quite impossible for humans to do since they cannot fine-tune their motion in midair. Ambrosia, on the other hand, did not land quite as smoothly. She slammed into the wolf's body, barely managing to grasp on to the top of the wolf. She began to slide down, but quickly hooked it with her fishing pole, wrapping it around the neck. She was now right near its mouth, so she swung hard to wrap more tightly and not be chomped, and managed to boost herself up again. Grabbing its massive shoulders, she held on tightly as it squirmed. The good news is that Elias got a break in healing everyone. The not-so-good news was now Ambrosia had a wild ride.

The wolf turned and bucked, tried to raise and lower its shoulder, rushed forward, and anything else it could think of. Ambrosia anticipated the wolf's motion somehow. She was tossed, she was knocked about, nevertheless she persisted. The wolf even tried to freeze her, yet her Lilac Dress protected her from the ice even when it was too close for her Protection From Elements aura to work. Ambrosia pulled out her hammer to bash its head in, only to have it turn into motes of light in her hand. She quickly grabbed her knife instead, and stabbed the crap out of it. Nevras was using Pierce attacks to wear it down, but despite the serious damage he was dealing, it wasn't even paying attention. I used the opportunity to climb it, then joined her. The wolf finally collapsed. Nearby was a save circle, so we used this, and set up a tent. I kinda... salvaged a lot of these mammoth bodies for meat and fur. The bones were also valuable, but we had to let some of this stuff go. There was simply too much. I sat by the fire with Elias, and talked all night. Right now, things were not exactly romantic, but he was good to me and I enjoyed talking to him, sitting around a fire surrounded by bones and angry mammoths.

The next morning, we headed out, searching for the thief of the keys and the source of the massive elephant slaughter. We didn't have to go far before we saw them. They leaped out of the trees in an ambush. Luckily, we had plenty of rest, and they had been sitting all night in a tree. They were weaker right now, and off their game, and this is why they were much weaker than they would later be, and not because it is still early in the story. It was a human male with long black hair with bangs neatly parted to the side holding a sword, and an older dwarf wielding an axe. Their weapons looked homemade though. The dwarf's axe had a front end like a typical woodsman's axe but the other end was more like a pickaxe for mining, it was build sturdy and from one piece of solid metal which did not appear to be steel; the man's sword was more like a naginata but for its relatively blunt tip, it was a broad sword with an extra long handle yet which wasn't long enough to be a reach weapon. “You took our prey! We were going to have that for dinner!” said a tall man with dark hair. The dwarf commanded, “Give it back!” I blurted out, “That wolf? The one that nearly killed all of us? We don't even want it, it just attacked us! We were out here looking for a key!” The dwarf and man looked at each other, then the man spoke, “Phim, didn't we steal that key to draw out the Oracle?” Phim said, “That's right, Sera, it was all part of my master plan. We were going to lead the Oracle out to this secluded forest to kill her, then use the key to raid the Aiken temple, and then after that find the young woman that scammed our client out of thousands of Gold in alchemic jewelry. He said he isn't so much concerned with the money as he is with finding her again.” Nevras

blushed slightly, but said nothing. The one known as Phim continued, “I bet the mayor sent you, didn't he?” making it obvious that they had no clue who we were. “So you thought you'd stop us from raiding the temple, huh?” Sera shook his head, “They seem kind of inexperienced for the mayor's posse, right? Well, they're no good to him dead.”

These two were skilled opponents. They had similar abilities to Nevras, so after getting a bad wound from Sera's Speed Slash and Phim using Pierce on Ambrosia, Elias warned us to sit this one out. We weren't warriors after all. Nevras told them, “Fight me instead! If I lose, you can hurt us as much as you want. If I win, you give us the key.” After a quick nod from them, Elias moved us to the outskirts of the area, moving our bodies with a makeshift stretcher. He wouldn't be able to help in the battle, but since we had both managed to get serious wounds in a matter of seconds, perhaps it was better to sit this one out. After setting up several paper amulets, Elias set of a ritual of Greater Protection. We would not be able to move from this spot if we wanted protection, but the barrier would all prevent all stray attacks from hitting. Despite warnings, I sat up in the stretcher to watch while Elias healed my wounds. Thankfully, unlike the earlier arrows, there was no shrapnel to heal. Unfortunately, we were bleeding out openly, and Elias was healing two of us.

Nevras drew his sword and carefully watched the two of them for any opening. Sera called his attack, “*Standing Jump Thrust!*” and swung. It had all of the power of a regular Jump Thrust, with gale force slicing wind and shockwave enough to rip a tree from its root, but he apparently could use it from a stationary position. Nevras stared at the attack, and dived to the ground. The Jump Thrust was normally angled in such a way that it couldn't be ducked, yet this appeared to be an upward wave of wind force. The attack continued on until it hit the barrier. Sera scoffed, “Coward.” Nevras responded, “I didn't know it was possible to do that. *Standing Jump Thrust!”* Sera responded with a Standing Jump Thrust of his own, and it seemed as though they were evenly matched. But although Nevras seemed to be faster at using techniques, enough so that he could counter the moves of the other, the truth was that his arm strength wasn't nearly as strong. The two attacks did cancel, yet Sera's attack nearly drove Nevras's back to him before finally it dissipated. While Nevras was occupied with Sera, Phim decided to attack, “*Wave Thrust*!”

As I watched from my stretcher, I enjoyed Elias placing his soft hands on my chest. By this point, he had finished healing Ambrosia, but he anticipated that she might try to jump back into the fray while he was actively healing me, so he sat on her stomach and pushed her down whenever she tried to sit up. She groaned with annoyance. With his other hand he poured a large amount of energy into closing my wounds. I had been injured by an axe, so I had a long open gash that extended from my abdomen to just missing my lungs. Had Elias not become stronger over the last few months, I would be dead between blood loss, internal bleeding, and leakage from internal organs. Elias had used a continuing prayer called Delay to free up his hands while he worked on both of us at once. As a result, I barely even noticed as he rubbed my stomach, moving upward until he... “Hey, don't get fresh! I wasn't wounded up there. No matter how perky they may be.” He continued his healing but remembered to behave. Honestly, just because he looks nerdy, a girl can't even let her guard down anymore.

I used to think battle was a matter of strength, speed, and timing. As I watched them, it was all of that, but I was struck by how much it resembled a simple game of rock-paper-scissors. A rock-paper-scissors game of doom... Phim had used Wave Thrust, as I mentioned, before I started getting felt up by my healer... creating a wave of energy in a current along the earth. Fortunately for Nevras, he decided to use Jump Thrust to rise above the attack, cutting both Sera and Phim with a sharp wind. As he landed, Phim tried to use the Pierce technique while Sera tried to prepare the Vacuum Slice. It was so named not only because it created a sound like a vacuum cleaner (yes, seriously), but also because it was a technique which temporarily created something like the Void, allowing the user to sever nearly anything. Nevras saw the Pierce attack coming, and dodged to the right, just as both of them tried to attack, and finished by using a Speed Slash from the side. As a result, Phim got knocked into path of Sera's attack. The Vacuum Slice ripped through the upper part of the axe handle, and the sudden change of speed caused the two

of them to collapse in a heap. They were injured, but their armor was tough enough that they were left with mainly bruises.

Sera pretended continuing the fight was beneath them. Sera said, “We'll spare you for now. I mean, it's not our problem they got suckered into fighting.” Phim wasn't quite the actor his friend was, so he scowled and said, “Keep your stinking key, you government dogs!” We had yet to inform them that, in fact, Ambrosia had been the person they were trying to assassinate, and seeing as how it was probably dangerous to tell them this, it was probably for the best that they didn't know. Sera walked at a swift pace, while Phim was still nearby several minutes later. We picked up the key.

After a long and twisty return trip through the forest, we made it back the town of Zuran. The mayor directed us to the Aiken temple outside of town. Our walk there was filled with encounters with the flying Ghobli hare. Flying Ghobli hares are no picnic, by the way. They fly around randomly, dive bombing anything they see as a threat, and then run for the hills. We were only hunting them for food, and they proved to be a nuisance. We walked for roughly half an hour of tall grass, sand, and rocks. The area that we walked through was a coastal grassland with coarse grasses that kept the beachfront from wearing away. This was an area that was a chore to pass even one mile without good shoes. Ambrosia had clothes given to her apparently by God. But all the same, I wondered whether her clothes might be First Material, because it seemed like they were just incredibly durable. The rest of us between the snow, rain, sand, and everything else on our journey were beginning to get muddy and torn clothes. Out of curiosity, I decided to test my suspicion. If it really was First Material I would not only be so jealous, but I would know right away if it tried to clean and restore itself. Pressing my hands to the ground, I let the current of land mana flow through my body, becoming a conduit to project the power sleeping in the terrain. Since about a day had passed, I could use my geomancy again, and I could think of no more appropriate way to use it. This time, it created a mudslide that caught Nevras and Ambrosia in his path, bowling them over and coating them in mud. I noticed that the outfit did appear to have a few runes light up in response to what I did, but it wasn't First Material.

Unlike the clothing of the old days, there was no need to size, nor was there any particular need to magically enhance clothing to stretch. You see, fabrics naturally stretch, even tight cotton, because of something called Original Intent. Elias is explaining it to me, because I asked. Original Intent is so named because it describes matter as it is originally intended to be. Like, water turns to ice, rocks are hard, certain fabrics are warm. This is also true of living matter, which is why it is easy to shapeshift into animals but shapeshifting into other people typically doesn't work. I'm told elves as part of their Original Intent do not gain weight, which could explain why I always feel hungry, and why I've never seen fat elves. As a result of the New Earth being slightly better than the old, clothing tends to stretch with the person.

That's right. No matter how little exercise Ambrosia did, how much she ate or slept, she could never outgrow her clothes. Along with prayer and thaumaturgy, this was one of the perks of the New Earth. Of course, this didn't stop people from being very insecure about their body weight, since they could still get heavier. I'm so glad I'm an elf.

As runes worked better with things with an Original Intent that had affinity for the runes (that is, it was easier to cast Durability on things that were already sturdy or Endure Weather on fur), the idea of enchanting a normal dress with all these runes... why I could make a fortune if I sold her dress. Not that I'd want to, of course.

She still needed to brush off the dirt, but the mud wasn't staining it. Ambrosia was less than pleased, “**Seriously**? Nine Realms, Aqorm!” And so it was that rather than arrive at our destination earlier, we spent the next half-hour with her on my back trying to give me a sleeper hold, and me wriggling around while she screamed and cursed me forever.

After apologizing profusely, we arrived at the Aiken temple covered in grime. The temple was built less like a place of worship, and more like a stronghold. There were high walls in on all sides of the grounds, made with some sort of tough ceramic composite that seemed to ward off not only heat and cold, but when I asked Elias to try to write a rune on it, we quickly found that the material did not allow runes, since it was too coarse a surface for writing to stick, and too sturdy for carving. Was this orichalcum? Inside the

walls, I could see four guard-towers, and one pagoda-like structure in the center. I imagine this place would stand up well to a number of military campaigns, including attempting to climb the wall or blast it with magic, and the gate was well planned against a standing army. The gate was a sort of reinforced metal that had a larger door, with a smaller door nested inside it. The outer door could only be opened from the inside and looked heavy enough that at least a hundred people were needed to open it. The inner door was only small enough for a single person to pass, unless we were talking about an army of halflings, and contrary to how most doors worked, the key did not open the door. Instead, this key appeared to ring a bell somewhere inside the wall, as I heard people rushing toward the gate. A woman's voice called out in a no-nonsense manner, “State your business for this visit. How is it you came by this key?” Ambrosia answered, “The mayor got it for us.” The woman's voice responded, “You lie. This key came to you by way of that accursed forest to the south. How dare you try to deceive us?” She was remarkably well informed. Elias spoke, “We were not attempting to lie, but simply telling the truth as it was expedient to do so. We seek entrance to this temple, for we bring the Oracle.” After a moment, she said, “That is correct.” The door unlatched, allowing us to pass. Elias inquired, “You are a Seer? Or a Truthteller?” Truthtellers can discover truth or falsehood in others but cannot tell lies, and Seers can see the past and future but cannot see with their own eyes. Now that we saw the woman, she appeared surprisingly young for her age. She was a half-elf with short black hair with a jeweled headdress and long flowing robes of blue with golden trim. The sleeves of her robe had tassels, and her eyes were a dull silver. She blushed, “Oh, me? I'm both. You will meet me near the top of the temple.” Bah, any idiot could predict that. We walked around the temple grounds. The area had a farm, complete with goats and sheep, along with some crops in a rather large greenhouse.

In another area, women and men were training in martial arts. At least, I thought it was martial arts. They were waving their hands in some kinda pattern. Though I don't normally see people's hands glow as they do martial arts.

CHAPTER 7

In which Anideshi is introduced, and Ambrosia has a nervous breakdown.

ANIDESHI

In the greenhouse, I sat in meditation. The Aiken monastery welcomed all people but believed in screening out all who would invade for violence or theft. The belief was called “bonds and boundaries” and was core to their life. The idea was that without boundaries, people wound up exploited or abused, but without bonds they were alone. As a result, the people here were very affectionate but also very guarded. As guests, we were not only allowed, but encouraged to discover our own spiritual and intellectual path. As a result, the town had a record number of singers, poets, artists, and musicians.

People had all types of relationships, but all were consensual. Typical morality about relationships did not apply, for their culture was based not on conventional rules but on treating people as they wanted to be wanted to be treated and not trespassing on the property of other people. The average resident here was taught how to guard themselves socially, spiritually, and physically against any type of abuse, and taught how to reach out to people without engaging in such behavior themselves. Those who weren't able to live under the same standards as they treated others were exiled outside the monastery.

And no, it wasn't a simple matter to get in or out. Underground, a technique known as “hardening” was used. While the soil itself was soft enough, some alchemic process had been applied to the soil that caused all moisture to flee to the layers above and below. This meant that the soil above was fertile enough to grow crops on, and the layer below was moist and damp, yet the soil itself was almost like a layer of iron itself. This layer was thick enough that most amateur engineers simply gave up before ever reaching the other side. And forget trying to fly or climb over, there were so many warding runes that it just wasn't a good idea. Even a dragon couldn't get through easily.

In this town, people lived rent-free and tax-free, seeing it as an infringement on

boundaries to force people to pay to live. On the other hand, most people saw it as rude to build permanent houses to start with. People slept, ate, or had sex anywhere they wanted. But, this wasn't a commune. There were no peace-and-love moocher types, everyone did their chores for the community, with the understanding that what people put in was what they got out, and how they treated others would be exactly they were treated. It wasn't a utopia, and they weren't Christians who turn the other cheek, but it was home.

We Druids were the closest thing to hippies among the residents and visitors. Even so, we grow crops in the greenhouse, where we live. We set up a Druid grove inside there for gathering natural energy. We gave to the Aiken mystics in exchange for our living under this roof, and occasionally a stipend if we exceeded expectations. I grew turnips.

My name is Anideshi. My life isn't what you would call normal. The thing is, I've been reincarnated, repeatedly. This wasn't just a deal where I vaguely remembered something, I had exact memory of everything that happened. There was a rare book in some libraries called the *Eternity Epic* which tells my life story. My story isn't just about me, though. I am fated to meet a specific person, the person who I love. But over many lifetimes, this story always ends in tragedy. Sometimes it is an arranged marriage that goes horribly wrong. Sometimes there is a jealous rival. And sometimes there was an age mismatch. There was a curse; no matter what we tried or how much we wanted to be together, we were stuck apart. My lover was lucky. They only knew of strong attraction towards me, while in each form, I had to suffer through each life.

People do not become dogs or cats when reborn, or at least I never did. I did occasionally become the opposite sex, and I did reincarnate in both my past and future. And I even had a few lives on the original Earth. In fact, sometimes I would be competing with a former version of myself for my love, sometimes I was born as a brother or sister of what should be my love, and the taboo made it impossible to pursue things. Now, we aren't all the same person reborn over and over. There are new souls, from what I can discover. But we seem to all come from the same source, what we call God. Knowing this didn't really make me any happier, though. Most of what I did on this world was wait and sleep, to the point where I was constantly bored and lethargic.

This life felt different somehow. Unlike my past lives, I was not a normal human. This body was born under the sign of the Sage and would one day realize its power. It felt like it might be my last time in the mortal world, so I would make it count. I would find my love, and I would help the Oracle save the land. If only I knew where she was.

Just then, one of the disciples of the monastery announced, “The Oracle of Tao has come! All is according to the prophecy!” I wanted to go, but it was the job of the Druid Elder instead. I looked to him, but he shook his head, “Go. They need someone young. My power is great, yet I am tied to this grove. If I leave it, I will begin to age again.” Well, okay. I left the greenhouse and searched the grounds for her.

AMBROSIA

“Are we being followed?” I asked Nevras. He shrugged, “Well, there does seem to be a very large cloud of mist following us, but I'm sure it's nothing.” I completely shut it out of my mind, even though it followed us when we went from place to place. We first met with the people farming and raising animals. There was a couple, a guy with blue hair like me and linen farming outfit and a girl with golden blond hair who appeared to be pregnant. I imagined their child would have green hair, but then, I don't understand genetics. I asked them, “Tell me about this place. Why is it that you have such high defenses when all that seems to be here is a farm and a shrine? Do you have some powerful weapon or magic?” Aqorm added, “Or loads or money we should definitely know about?” They shook their heads. “We have only the money we carry, or decide to give to help others who live among us. We have weapons only to defend ourselves from those who may attack us. Only our lives are valuable. We grow these crops in case of a siege and for health. Good boundaries mean to love ourselves, just as good bonds means we love others,” finishing each other's sentences, shortly before making out, in front of us. Nevras gasped, as he had been raised among polite society. I didn't care that much.

We next looked at those engaging in martial arts. As they explained, this was not actually a martial art (though they claimed it could be) so much as a mystical art, useful

for understanding the universe. The form roughly resembled *tai chi*, but it was built around five elements (fire, water, earth, wood, and wind) as well as light and dark. Each of these had a particular hand sign, and a particular movement or pattern. They showed us only the main five of them as a sort of martial arts dance thingy (Elias explains this is called *kata*). They explained that studying this was part of their religious ritual, as it not only taught them to defend themselves, but those who could use prayers learned how to properly understand how their prayers were divided into elemental parts. To say nothing of how knowing these affected their understanding of competing and complementing forces in the universe.

I have been known to be impulsive. Just a smidge. So while they talked, I wanted to test how good their martial arts were. Against my (and everyone else's) better judgement, I whipped out a knife and charged at them. “Let's see you try to block this,” was not much of a battle cry, but whatever. The nearest one, a tall bald man with a yellow uniform was the one I picked. I later learned that rather than a belt system, they were ranked by the color of their uniform, from white as a novice to yellow, then orange, green, brown, red, and finally black. It looked like there were a couple of ranks beyond black though. After black, they were awarded a symbol on their vest that resembled a broken heart, and from what I could tell by frequency, the ranking worked in opposite order, with a black uniform and white heart being the absolute best. This guy seemed to be in the second to worst rank then.

As I rushed forward, I decided to use the flat of the blade so as to not hurt him too badly. What I didn't expect to happen was for the man to effortlessly push my hand away with an earth style inside block, knocking the knife out of my hand, then using a water style throw to lay me on my back. I imagine if they had been high rank, they might have been able to do so in such a way that I would never have seen it happen. I apologized, and thanked him for the demonstration, then decided it was time to climb the temple.

The temple, it turned out, was much taller and much larger than it seemed from the outside. When we entered, there appeared to be a staircase to a basement level. But alas, it was guarded by a man that said it would be very dangerous to enter the area. Darn. Each room in the tower was decorated as its occupants wished but the stone walls, winding stairs, and half-moon windows were the same. Every few floors also had a small restroom with an incinerator toilet, which looked like it was taken out for fertilizer on a regular basis. As for the occupants, I found that it ran the gamut.

On floor 16, an instructor was showing the method using a straw dummy for making heads explode using pressure points, while the instructor encouraged the pupils to scream at it, “お前はもう 生きていない!” I can't imagine how that move would ever be useful, short of making people nearby completely freak out. On the 25th floor, there were a group of people apparently holding some kind of rally, and the man talked about securing borders and “Make Aiken a Great Monastery Again.” Nevras asked, “MAGMA???” We were on a holy quest though, and didn't have time for their politics. Then a woman on floor 64 offered to teach us about the Aiken religion, but it seemed to me at the time that they were just hateful racists with no concept of the outside world. Although I was intrigued by the whole deal with bonds and boundaries, I couldn't imagine excluding people from my life just because we didn't agree.

The tower, as I say, was impossibly high. From the outside, it looked like I could still see the top. Inside, it was clear that was some sort of illusion, because the windows viewing outside moved from ground level, to a very high view of the monastery grounds, to seeing nearby countries, moving into view of the clouds, to moving to steadily thinning air, and I could view the entire northern hemisphere of the New Earth when we reached the top of the tower.

The fog had continued to follow us for quite some time, despite it being extremely suspicious. The mist receded when the air thinned, revealing a suddenly anxious woman in a loose green karate outfit which unlike the others had a crude evergreen tree embroidered on it, with medium-length brown hair. She had a very weird face, it was not ugly but very symmetrical, but there was something strange about her eyes. They were normal width apart but they were roughly between the size of a Margaret Keane kid and that of an average anime character. Her eyes were intense and focused, and they had a sad

and soulful look to them of someone who had seen entirely too much pain. Looking at her, I immediately wanted to cry. But I was a strong and independent woman and there was no way that I... Nevras blurted out the obvious, “Ambrosia, you're...” I cut him off, “Another word and you die,” like the strong and independent woman that I was. Finally, I asked, “Who are you, and why have you been following us?” The girl in the green outfit introduced herself as Anideshi, but I was careful to point out, “No you aren’t. I’ve decided that Anideshi is too hard to say, and Zoe suits you better anyway. Also her name is Azrael, and I want you guys to match!”

UMMM ZOE

I had no idea what this girl was talking about, and her friends seemed just as confused as me, but this girl continued to tell me less and less desirable names as I refused, and eventually I caved. It seemed as though I should know the name Azrael despite having no reason to do so, and I kept wondered if this might be the girl that I dreamed about.

AMBROSIA

Zoe continued, “I'm sorry for stalking you guys! I just wanted to be sure you were the Oracle of Tao, and I didn't want to alert you guys to my presence until I was sure. But, now I'm sure, you have to be the Oracle of Tao.” She advanced to shake Aqorm's hand. “Hey, ummm over here, I'm the Oracle,” I said. “At least, I don't think it's really Aqorm.” She blushed, “Oh my! Well, I'm not as sure about you, but okay.” Nevras asked, “I don't get it. If you didn't want to get seen, why didn't you just turn invisible? I mean, it was really easy to notice a big cloud shadowing us.” She bowed, and apologized, “I can't turn invisible because I'm a Druid, and my power doesn't work that way. I could try my Camouflage, but I'd need to stay near the walls all the time. And turning into an insect just means I get squished. I don't want to be squished. Anyway, you're probably not the Oracle, so I guess I'll head back...” I don't know if this was reverse psychology, but I flatly refused, “Uhh uhh, you're coming with us!” We dragged her up with us while she cried, until finally she stopped resisting and agreed to follow us willingly. Victory! We had a new member in our group, one with elemental magic, from the looks of it.

We continued to wander up the tower. On the 97th floor there were creepy guys in black hoods chanting over someone who was tied up while candles were burning on the floor. Death Sect groupies, followers of Thanatos. “You okay? Do you need to be saved?” The bound man shook his head, “No way! I volunteered for this. Do you not know that with my sacrifice, a new save circle will be built?” The Death Sect members nodded, “It's true! We would not be allowed into this monastery if we were not hired to do this.” I gasped. Save circles came... from that? Elias frowned, but nodded, “Yes, save circles come from human sacrifices. This is why they are extremely common in dungeons. Just think how many times a part member offers to fend the creatures off while the others escape. But they don't have to be a life sacrifice, strictly speaking. Sacrifice of worldly goods, sacrifice of a portion of mystic power, any of these things will create a save point.” I didn't understand though, why would anyone give their own life to save others?

On the 98th floor were beds for guests to rest from their long trip. We all took advantage of these, then walked down a floor to save ourselves. I wish there was something we could have done for him. But no, he had been determined to die for us, even though we were pretty flawed people. I mean, c'mon, look at Aqorm. Ow! I was only kidding. We walked to the 99th floor.

As promised, the Seer/Truthteller lady was there. She had only promised to meet us near the top, but I didn't see any stairs up. “Hey there! I'm Gwendolyn.” she said. What kind of fortuneteller addressed people with those words? “Ummm hi,” I said back, “I've been meaning to ask, can you actually see what we look like?” She responded, “Sort of. I see my own past and I see the most likely future, but I can't see things in the world of the present. I mean, I know what you look like from meeting you, and I saw that you would be there in this room ahead of time. But if you suddenly held up your fingers in front of me, I couldn't see it. There is a five minute window between the past and the future, which I am completely blind.” That cleared up a few things, but it got me thinking, “So wait, if you know what I'm gonna do, does this mean that I have no options? That everything is set in stone?” Gwen giggled a bit, “I'm actually glad you asked that

question! So many people trying to meet the Oracle up top never make any realizations of the future, and automatically assume this to be true. I have to send them back down, because they aren't teachable. But you... I see potential in your eyes. I see the past as it is, usually fixed and permanent, short of a time travel event. Which rarely happens anymore, though I noticed a ripple awhile back. Tried to fight someone for their yacht, did you?" I frowned. She continued, "As I say though, the past is usually set in stone. And the present is completely beyond my sight, though my Truthteller powers help. But the future? It's usually a hopeless mess." Now I was confused, "What do you mean?" Gwendolyn elaborated, "Let's say you hold up your fingers. I would see different branches of the future, each with you holding different numbers, five minutes into the future. I would see nothing if you acted immediately, before five minutes. It would only be if you fixed on a specific number that things would narrow to a specific path." After a second, I blurted out, "But what if I lied?" She shook her head, "It wouldn't change anything. I'm a Truthteller, remember? Seeing yourself pick 'five' but deciding to pick 'two' would still mean I would know you would pick two. Destiny is not about a single path, it's about our decisions. In order to see the future, both the idea that there is a future to be seen and that one can change it must be true, or there is no point in telling anyone the future. Like... that staircase over there." I stared blankly because there was no staircase, only a wall and a ceiling. "That staircase is there, but you don't see it yet, because someone hasn't decided in the past to build it. There now, see?" I still didn't see a staircase, but suddenly, I saw a hole in the ceiling, and then stone blocks laying themselves quickly before my eyes. After only a few moments there was indeed a staircase winding its way to the top of the tower. I now had a headache. "Thank you Gwen!" we said as we climbed away. "Remember, you make your destiny!" she called after us.

We reached the top of the tower, and then I saw him. With his feathered cap and wind-swept silver hair, he looked like some kind of bard. "So you've come. And doubtless, you wish to know about the Crest." I nodded. This was it, I would finally get handed the power of the Crest. With no effort on my part at all! I responded, "Of course! That's why we're here! Can you help us or not?" Then it happened. He actually smirked. I knew it. He's a spoony bard. "Still so impatient, are we? Well, time to test you. We can't have unworthy people go around and use our Crests, can we? That's just wouldn't be right," he said. Still? What does he mean still? How does he know me? *Not another battle...* I thought. As soon as this thought popped into my head, the Oracle spoke, "No, no, it's not like you think, I won't make you battle. I simply want to ask you a few questions." All of the tension went out of my body. *Whew*, I thought. *Hey wait, did he just read my mind there?!?* and then it was back again. He asked point blank, "Why do you want to be an Oracle of Tao?"

That really was the question, wasn't it? I said, "I'm doing it because God asked me to save the world, why else?" I mean, duh, isn't that what all heroes did? He made a stopping motion with his hand, "Wait, hold up, there. You're doing it because someone else asked you to? What are your reasons for wanting this? Evil will come to oppose your quest, and when it does, 'God told me' just won't cut it. Try again please." I thought to myself, *I knew that answer was too easy! Truth is, I don't know!* Instead, I said, "Ummmmm....I've been on the street my whole life, and this will help me succeed, and find my place in the world." It was true, from a certain point of view. I could claim that this would help me belong, as an outcast. But honestly, I wasn't that interested in success. He scoffed, "These reasons, or should I say, excuses lack conviction. That won't work either as a reason." Heaven and Earth, this guy was tough! I snapped at him, "Gimme a break! Nobody even told me what my job entailed before they gave to me! Why won't you accept this answer?" He explained, "It's simple. Success is as meaningless as failure, since when you die, nothing will change. And fitting in? Why would you waste your life seeking the approval of others? Be yourself." I was grasping at straws, so I came up with something, "Sigh... I guess I wanna make a difference in the world. I want to do the right thing." He shook his head, "The world doesn't need to be changed. Thousands of years have passed since the demon last came, and society has recovered nicely. There is worldwide peace, and kingdoms keep out of each other's territory by law. What is there to fix? You said you want to do the right thing, but... even villains and tyrants claim to be

doing the right thing, while they bully others and meddle in world affairs. In their greed for power, they constantly tell themselves, and others, that what they do is for the good of all. Then they doom their countries. If that is your argument, tell me. Are they right? Or are you wrong?" Nevras sighed, as though he knew about that.

I thought about my own thoughts only an hour ago. How I had supposed these people paranoid or racist, just for wanting to be able to shut out other people who might want to hurt of control them. Then I thought about how nations in the past had insisted on heavy immigration even when their citizens hated it, because it was for the "greater good." I thought of how if I became some kind of super-powerful hero, kings and countries might realistically ask me to help fight in their wars. Even if I vowed to stay neutral and only fought creatures, some of these might cause political advantage. And how could I be sure that destroying a demon was the right thing to do? ...Okay, maybe that last one was an easy call. I stammered, "But... then what about the world... All those people? Everyone will die if I do nothing." This Oracle giggled at the suggestion, as though I had said something incredibly ignorant. I hated this guy. He coldly stated, "Did any of them lift a finger to help you off the streets? Human lives enter a cycle of rebirth anyway, until they attain purity and head for higher planes. Worlds get made by God all the time, why is it your job to shed a tear over that which can be replaced in a heartbeat? Why should you care?" I was suddenly filled with a sense of hopelessness. I was working to make a difference in this world, yet everyone in this insular community had things figured out, meanwhile my world was a mess. My life was constant travel, and there were ridiculous events happening all the time. Nevras was the only thing in my life that made any sense. But no, I couldn't. If I didn't save the world, Nevras would be gone and so would I... but if what he said were true, was all of this a waste? I questioned him, "But then, is there nothing I can do?" There must be some path that he knew of as a great guru. He was just keeping it from me until the time was right. Without hesitation, he spoke, "Yes. Give up the Oracle title, and return to your original state, and people around this world will prosper. It will be better if you return to being a beggar, and leave this quest." So it was true then. All my effort was a waste of time. Nobody needed me here, and I was a simple peasant girl. I had no business fighting massive demons or other things.

I had already become involved in the affair of the mayor, what if they just kept asking more of me, until one day I couldn't deliver? *If I quit now, my entire life will have been a waste, but what can I do?!?* I thought. As sadness and despair crept up on me, my body reacted the best way it knew how, by suddenly shutting down. I just wanted to sleep and never wake up. While the latter part wasn't certain, the former was quickly granted. "Ambrosia! Are you all right?" I heard Nevras call as consciousness began to fade out...

THE WORLD

While it might be tempting to focus all of our attention on Ambrosia, other events were transpiring in this New Earth. As was possibly mentioned earlier, upon the foundation of the New Earth, those who were imported from the original world remembered what a mess life became, and legitimately wanted to build a better one. Besides which, this girl after awakening is currently in a state of deep depression, feeling her only sense of purpose in this life stripped away. She will not leave her bed right now, even to eat. And so, we discuss events from an overhead view of the world. It is I, God doing the narrating, but I will instead take a mortal form as the Narrator. Refer to me as such from now on.

In a small island to the south of Ghobli, events were taking place of a decidedly political nature. The New Earth had poles in its eastern and western areas rather than north and south. It is for this reason that southwest of Ghobli, there was a frozen island where a dragon lived, while this island was temperate. The island was a mass of concentric mountain slopes starting from a very rocky beach. On the peak of the island, was a large building for gathering to discuss world events. In the center of the building there stood a large table. Every so often, usually six months if no major emergency came up, the leaders of each major town gathered to discuss world events and in some cases to engage in trade. In addition to high mountains, the island had guards and various physical and mystical fortifications against unauthorized entry.

This was the Anti-Government Council, the height of government hypocrisy, an organization dedicated towards maintaining peace through suppression of big government, through world government intervention. These people kept all towns from reaching too big, kept kings from ruling more than one town, and kept certain technologies from being developed. They were why there were no credit cards (people used checks, Gold, or ATM cards instead), there was no mass immigration, there were no stock markets, there were no guns, radiation, genetic modification, power plants, or international trade companies. It also meant outside town, you had to set up everything.

There were no guns, not because the people couldn't be trusted to hold them, but the other way around. Guns were not easy to make without help, unlike bows or swords, which a simple crafter could produce. All the moving parts, the chemical makeup of gunpowder and so on, meant they were tools of the elite, and thus tools of the State. The government did manage to take away all guns, but did so by emptying all gunpowder into the making of bombs, and using the metal to forge simple yet sturdy weapons or tools. Thus, rather than disarming the population, people were simply armed with more accessible weapons. There was no credit for the same reason. When people borrowed from others, the State had convinced them that they owed taxes. It was a tool that created poverty. Instead, a debt-free economy emerged, and people suddenly bought or rented only what they needed.

Power plants and gene modification were also abolished. No explanation for banning gene modification was ever given, but I know they had a good reason. Now only wicked sorcerers attempted this. And power plants? That was quaint. There was basically no need to be tied to a big fuel source, because all magic was self-contained. A light bulb, for instance, no longer ran by relying on wires sending energy from some building outside town. Theoretically any wonder-worker that knew Illuminate could enchant glass to produce light on command (the problem, of course, was mass-production).

This was why the average citizen instead used magic, a source which was heavily limited by human endurance, and alchemy, a science-like system which had its own bizarre limits. To the Council's merit, for thousands of years, they had managed to completely prevent wars (aside from minor skirmishes), pollution, and government oppression. The State had been kept from returning.

Today, they met not only as part of their six month schedule but as part of the anniversary of the Council's founding; there was no reason to suspect that anything was amiss. But while Ambrosia lay in her bed depressed, the Council was about to decline.

Each member of the Council was part of a land that was majority human, as these were the most common governed people. For this reason, Hell was not a member of Council, since aside from its extreme antipathy toward the Council's principles it had mainly demons, nor was Heaven as it had humans but they were mostly the dead. A young woman with long white hair, and a blue/white striped headband in a pale blue nightgown rose first. While she appeared as a young girl, this was Hinata's elder, and a powerful leader despite her town being a vacation spot in the middle of nowhere. She was leader of the Council. In actual terms of assertiveness, well... not so much. She believed in being fair and impartial and listening to other voices within the Council... That said, she tended to listen far better than she managed to speak up. Her fellow town leaders, kings, and mayors on the other hand, tended to be extroverted, narcissistic, and antagonistic towards dissent. She announced, “I call to order the anniversary meeting of the Anti-Government Council. Please state your concerns.” The mayor of Ghobli, a far cry from the kindly yet imposing mayor of Zuran, was a short portly balding man with a mustache that a villain from a melodrama would envy. Although the Aiken monastery lived close to both Zuran and Ghobli, only Zuran had earned the keys to the area for visit. This guy was selfish, ruthless, and obsessed with money. Despite a relatively low income of leaders given the taxation restrictions of the Council, he made sure that he added a fair amount of sales taxes. This man was not even the worst person here, though, that honor rested with King Yama, a conniving and war-seeking control freak.

Ghobli's mayor simply wanted wealth, as became immediately apparent when he announced, “I would like a trade agreement with Kirin. Doing so would allow access to greater number of goods for our merchants to sell.” The elder's face relaxed. She had

worried once again when she saw him raise his hand, as was the custom to prevent outright interruption, that he would once again make the request to restore the practice of income taxes. After a brief consideration, she said, “There is no apparent political connection due to the distance between the two towns, so there is little danger of colonization or an empire. Any objections?” There were none, as was obvious since all points were correct. Kirin was difficult for Ghobli to access, since something always prevented sailors from sailing directly west to Kirin despite maps showing them nearby on the map; the alternative was a long circuitous route to the east. Any goods from Kirin would fetch a high price, yet it was sufficiently distant to prevent this from becoming out of hand. And there was definitely no danger of a colony. The land of Kirin was such that no sane person would want to live there, being a land of perpetual snow and ice. Kirin's exports were exotic snowbirds and seafood, furs and firs, and products made from ice elementals. The land of Kirin would become enriched by the influx of fruits and vegetables without the need of much money, while the mayor of Ghobli would become rich from importation of rare goods. She nodded, “Okay, then. In that case, the motion is passed. Any other issues?”

The queen of Aquamundo raised her hand and spoke, “The fishing offshore is limiting our food supplies. Could it be restricted?” Aquamundo's queen was merfolk, yet was among the few of her kind, had only a few indicators of her race. She had long since shed her tail so she stood upright, and her gills were barely visible, but she did have light blue skin, and blue-green hair. She sat in a green cocktail dress, and was admired by many of the male members of the Council. “While this motion has benefits to Aquamundo, it obviously depletes the total food of those dwelling near the regions of Galaxia. Therefore, I must ask that there are additional votes. Do any of you second this motion?” asked the elder of Hinata. Surprisingly, the mayor of Zuran rose to his full stature and told her, “I second this motion.” Normally, the motion would then go to a vote, but since someone with no apparent vested interest agreed, Galaxia didn't protest, and since this man was so big as to be imposing, Hinata's elder simply said, “Motion is passed.”

The leader of Kirin, its chief, raised her hand next. She was a young woman with blonde hair dressed in furs. Possibly since the climate was so much colder there, it was fairer to say that she was currently wearing only fur lingerie. She requested, “I would like to increase the game hunting in Kirin area for the purposes of the fur trade. Our people are freezing in our climate!” Hinata's elder spoke, “Hmmm, the country does need the product for its survival. And it could be an export to other towns. I approve this. Any other issues?”

The King Yama of Kushiyama stood, a man who appeared in his eighties yet no less ambitious over the years. He did not bother to raise his hand to speak, “I would like to increase our allocation of military.” The elder raised her eyebrow, “What does the Council believe?” The daimyo of Gruumi, a samurai warrior in full lamellar armor, agreed, “I second this. Military buildup is key to enforcing the sovereignty of each town. Please allow this.” Hinata's elder looked around the room. The Galaxia king looked like a traditional aging royal and had no major objections from the looks of this. The guru of Shoten was largely a figurehead, a young red-haired man who looked more like a teen idol than a political leader. Then there was the chief exorcist of Goji, a woman in her thirties decked out in a ceremonial gown. None of these appeared to have any strong objections, yet to the side, the king and queen of Phoenix, King Charis and Queen Victoria mumbled. Queen Victoria had a countenance with all the wild intensity of a flame, and she would likely use a broadsword to cut anyone who crossed her into pieces. Of course, given that many leaders expected a king to be authoritative and the queen to follow his lead, in public she had to make a big show of making subtle 'suggestions'. She began whispering to him, but the rest of the audience didn't appear to notice, as the Hinata elder proceeded, “If there are no objections, the movement is...”

King Charis stood up, and interrupted, not even bothering to raise his hand, “I object! Kushiyama already has the centralized government to become a small empire, something forbidden by the Council at its conception. To appease its government more would open the opportunity for invasion of other countries!” Kirin's chief raised her hand and blurted out, “I second this objection, having been a nearby town to Kushiyama. They might

invade our thriving winter town, and possess our land." No one wanted Kirin. But these outbursts caused a great deal of turmoil. There was arguing back and forth about the merits and flaws of this plan. It appeared as if order would never return, as Hinata's elder, Lajila, struggled to speak, "Guys could you please... I'm trying to speak. Hey c'mon, you know it's hard for me. Please, stop talking. **QUIET!!!** Quiet, please." Lajila spoke again, "It appears we cannot agree on this issue. I suggest that we reconvene later." Hinata's elder Lajila seemed shaken by these events as she walked out of the building.

In another island, also covered in mountains, a man with a long billowing brown robe prayed and chanted to a large earthenware fermentation pot. The urn was covered with a clay top and the entire thing was chained closed, with several paper bindings fastening it shut. This wretch was Yazim Jianne, and the urn of course contained the demon Belial. It was a great relief that Belial was not formally summoned outside the urn, or he may be able to see me, the Narrator. Belial boasted, "**Mwahahaha! Let us unleash order among this world! No longer will the world by ruled by those who refuse to rule over it! The power of the Realm of Void will control it!**"

It was clear from this, that Belial had a direct hand in tempting the king to his ambition. Yazim Jianne chuckled maniacally and nodded, "Good, good. And as your authority grows, you will gain the power to raise the dead. She will return before the next full moon, as promised." Belial responded almost dismissively, "**Patience, my servant. I have promised, after all.**"

CHAPTER 8

In which everyone learns the importance of psychology. Also, there are zombies.

NEVRAS

After her collapse, we put Ambrosia in a bed on the 98th floor. There was a public rest space, but the area also contained rooms that could be locked. The public space was free, since the pilgrims who offered alms more than paid for it, and it was indeed a long trip up all of these floors. The private rooms, on the other hand, cost a pretty penny.

The thing which I had shown to the merchant at the market earlier was my Royal Crest. The importance of this wasn't to do with credit, since such no longer existed. Nor was it authority, as people since the Council was formed understood that leadership was a contract with the people, and thus I wasn't telling her "do this by order of the kingdom." All nations had a Mandate of Heaven, after all, not to oppress citizens.

Instead, it was a mystical binding agreement that within the hour, any who cooperated in kind (giving us goods in a marketplace, letting us pass, or whatever else) would either receive money in their bank, or if no such bank account existed, money from our treasury would drop in bags from the sky. And yes, I could use this to drop money bags directly on top of creatures in battle.

Of course, the authority of the leader was based on consent of the governed. So if they refused, no such good fortune would befall them. Phoenix received its money not through taxes or even voluntary tributes, but by **divine right**. It was fiat currency, but it was backed by being print-on-demand by God, in exchange for just and proper rule of our town and just relations with other countries. And there were no worries about inflation, since money *only* originated from this source. That is, unlike most towns even within the Council's auspices, Phoenix collected no taxes ever.

Since most of those reading this journal will not understand how such an economy can be sustainable, it's like this. Economy is a cycle. If I made 10,000 Gold a year for twenty-five years and bought a house, but there were no taxes of any kind, the person who sold a house would have that money intact so they too could make big or small purchases. As long as they did not hoard and spent on whatever they wanted, nearby businesses would prosper and everyone has enough, as long as people are interested in what they have. At the opposite extreme, the State is not part of the cycle of economic transfer and taxes but doesn't give anything back in refunds or stimuli; every time this 10,000 Gold changes hands, the State takes 10% or so, but never returns it. After one time, this is 9000 Gold, then 8100 Gold, then 7290 Gold, and so on until everyone is

poor. At this point, any decent government would at the very least give a stimulus to all the people they robbed, but usually this is in the form of a loan. Rather, Phoenix remains within the Mandate of Heaven by being part of the cycle of economical transfer.

If someone were to be able to buy a house for 100 thousand Gold, the seller of the house kept that money in full to buy their own house, and that seller also, and so on. In fact, the only time money ever got out of circulation was either by breaking down from use (which usually didn't happen, since God made it), or temporarily if they gave us tribute or bought from the Royal Purveyor. It was the philosophy of the first kings of Phoenix that rulers ought to be free from debt to its taxed, from debt to other countries, from federal reserve systems, and from lobbies or special interests. And so, most of my mom's real money came to her from running this store, then the royal family regularly patronized local businesses. While normally such a store couldn't turn a profit, she had set up an online store called Gargarean.com to collect and ship goods all over the world. In this way, she managed to both sell her goods to other countries, and ship goods to her own store. Anyway, the Royal Crest was regarded as legal tender everywhere that used Gold because of this.

There was a drawback of its use. Anyone who had seen it knew my face and name even while I was disguised, and they knew our current location each time I used it. If I was ever in any real trouble, royal guards would know my location... although they would need to travel themselves, I couldn't drop them from the sky too. I was suddenly grateful I had not shown that alchemist my Royal Crest. Knowing that he already had sent two bounty hunters after us, I was in no hurry to let him know exactly who and where we were. My parents however would kill me themselves if I spent too much, so I was careful to properly use this tool.

I saw the room when we checked in. It was a nice plus room, filled with the latest advances in thaumaturgy and alchemy. There was an Glow Orb™ hanging from the ceiling, an alchemical advance of touch-toggle perpetual light system that I heard actually originated in the town of Opening. I wonder if Ambrosia knew the person. I did hear that there was some tragedy involved in its original production, though.

They had food preservation cabinets. They had beds that were literally sculpted out of air. They had a food athanor, which created finished dishes from simple ingredients using advanced alchemy; at one point she asked for some flour, sugar, salt, butter and some apples to be brought up, then a couple of seconds later I smelled apple pie. They had a shower/bath which used custom runes to make sure the water as always the precise heat that the user wanted. I would like to say they had a state-of-the-art television screen, but this wasn't quite true. We had definitely heard of TV. But several millennia had passed and nobody knew how to make it. People had managed to archive most of known film/television into a series of data crystals. But there were no new shows, just records of old movies, anime, and shows from around the 1940s onward. At certain points this was disrupted, like when television was banned by Ungorr on the grounds that he didn't understand the appeal of shows like *30 Rock* and they hurt his brain. There was also a fair amount of film destroyed during various religious conquests, because some of these groups objected to graven images. And still others were damaged simply because they got wet or dirty or were cut by the laser. What unreliable devices!

We could play crystals by placing them inside of a wall frame of any mirror (all newer mirrors were fitted with such, called a Crystal Mirror™) which had a slot to store them, and the screen would change from an image of ourselves to display this information as originally intended. Even knowing how to print pictures on memory paper (allowing those who touched the image to recall the event), there was something we were missing about how the process of animating worked. The technology was simply too alien to how alchemy and runes worked.

And so it was that Ambrosia after waking from her sleep, had locked the door from the inside, ordered all of her food in, and we could hear the likes of *Starhunter* and *Starhunter 2300* coming from her room. She slept late, and stayed up late watching shows, opening the door only to

It had been a week. Rent was almost nonexistent, after the Council did away with credit and other usury, so rooms could either be used for the night or bought. Once

bought, they stayed bought until the user left town or formally checked out. Most innkeepers developed a method of charging by the key, and they'd do some weird ritual called the Forging of Objects, where they'd basically sacrifice something valuable (usually 100 Gold) to create a lasting object, magical or not. For this reason, innkeepers could make money simply by charging for every visitor. Although this didn't stop them from also charging for room service whether this meant fluffing beds up, delivering food, or giving other perks that guests wanted.

However, given how much she was spending on perks, we might eventually need to think about possibly getting her out of the room sometime this month. Aqorm tried first, but failed miserably. Perhaps it was her rough manner, “How long around you going to stay in your room? Don't you know how much it is costing Nevras and his family to put you up each night? And here you are, eating fine food, and watching crappy shows! I smell crab-stuffed lobster with hollandaise sauce and sautéed onions with a side of venison carpaccio! You should be ashamed! We have to walk all the way downstairs every day to get anything decent to eat, otherwise all that keeps up here is water and bread.” Honestly, it was fine with me, but one look at the amount of drool told me Aqorm's real motivations. Ambrosia just told her, “Shut up already! I have eaten horrible food for years, I just found out my life probably has no point, and I'm bored and just wish I could die, but that happened already and God reset things. I know I want to behave better, but it all just feels pointless. I'll be out eventually. Just after this episode...” She was midway through the Korean drama *Legend of Qin*, when Elias gave it a try. He offered, “I have seen this historical drama. You know the first couple gives up all their powers, and the second male lead dies in a hopeless battle, right?” Ambrosia said, “Get out of here! You spoiled it!” Outside the temple, it was raining, and had been for most of the week.

Three days later, Zoe tried. “Look, I kind of just met you, and so I really don't know what to say... but I was born with memory of my own reincarnations. Every time, I come into this world, I try and try to meet up with the one I love, but every time it's cursed. And I know Gwen talks about how destiny is largely defined by our choices, but it seems like I make bad ones or have bad timing. I'm just tired of being the wrong girl all the time!” she sobbed. Ambrosia let her inside, “You need to come inside and watch Asian dramas with me.” I owed the price of a second key. Another week or so passed, and while Ambrosia was thankfully no longer alone, they were sobbing inside periodically, either from their own troubles or from the latest romantic or sad moment in the drama. I didn't want to barge in, but it was kind of time.

I said, “Don't let that guy get to you! We believe you're doing the right thing, even if he doesn't. And I know it seems hopeless-” “Pointless,” she cut in. “Pointless,” I conceded, “but let's see if we can do something fun or interesting.” The door opened a crack, “Nevras, I-” I ordered the others, “Now, while the door is open. Rush the door, grab her legs, we're pulling her out. Like it or not, you can't stay here.” She sulked, “I hate you guys... Not you, Zoe. You're awesome.”

After settling a bit, she said, “But what if he's right? We have really no way of knowing, and based on how I've let my anger get the best of me, what if I am that type of brutal person? What if the only reason I brought everyone on this quest is because I let my blood lust convince me that God gave me this mission? It has happened before, after all.” Bah. I told her my feelings, “As your friends, would you expect it to really make any difference to us? If it will cheer you up, why don't we search the monastery for our own answers to the question?” Her face briefly cracked a smile before darkening again, “Thanks, Nevras. You've been good to me.”

While it was easy to promise this, actually doing it took more work. We had to walk all the way down to the 64th floor to listen to the woman talk. This time, we let her speak. “So let's start at the beginning, why are you called Aiken?” I asked her. The woman smiled, “It's kind of a weird explanation but... see this fist of mine?” She clenched her fist, flexing her muscles slightly. For a woman, she was more than a bit ripped, although not grossly muscle-bound. “What are you planning on doing with that?” Ambrosia asked. The woman ignored her, “Well, Aiken means 'love' or 'loving' 'fist' or 'sword'. The idea is that the same hands that a person can use to hurt people is also used to hug or embrace a

person, and that a sword can either be used to slaughter people or defend the ones you love." Ambrosia asked the questions next, "So, you did you come about? Did God or the gods speak to the founder? Did they sit up on a mountain? Was the founder an avatar from another world?" This time, she giggled, "I'm afraid none of those things," she said as she finished, "the founder was a person named Samantha Rinne Hooker. Sam was born in Connecticut, but moved to Virginia when she was four. After that, she moved every seven years or so, for quite a while. She was always an outsider, and always the weird one, so she sought out some truth to understand life. She had been raised Episcopal, but in high school had found a copy of the Tao te Ching, and in college had managed to take World Religions not once but twice, thanks to a clerical error. She thought about how her life had shaped together from her experiences, and she thought about the atheists who was all religions as made up by her founder. She believed it was more a matter of each religion having been inspired by the revelations, real or fake, of the founder. As in, a founder who was fake about their belief system would use their motivations to rule or control. It was a matter of personally wanting a relationship with God and a spiritual experience. Sam was a cold rational type and couldn't accept anything without mountains of proof. So after she wrote the *Mune Shinri*, summarizing her own beliefs, and a roleplaying game version of this book, the *Oracle of Tao*, she had not expected anything profound to happen to her. But it did."

Ambrosia and I looked puzzled. *What is she talking about*? I thought. I withheld any remark though, as this girl continued. Ambrosia inquired, "So what exactly does the *Mune Shinri* say? What do they believe?" The woman took a deep breath before speaking, "On her life's journey, moving from town to town, she held three things as constant or sacred: Love, Nature, and Family. She reasoned that even if all relatives died, someone's family would still exist because of the past being part of who raised that person, and one with a crappy family could largely make 'family' out of their friends. Likewise, love was something that was eternal, because each person met was actually part of a larger spiritual love, that separation was an illusion, but actually that people would always love different manifestations of that person. I didn't understand this part as well. And nature was something that always repeated a pattern of growth, death, and rebirth. The *Mune Shinri*, means roughly 'Heart' 'Truth' conveying the idea that each person is guided by their own beliefs, their own core shaped by their past. The book taught the leader's personal thoughts, though, including..." She rambled on but my interest only returned later, "Most Aiken believe that the Afterlife is completely subjective, and reshapes to the beliefs of the person living there. Pretty much all Aiken believe in bonds and boundaries, because it is understood that in order to live with others in a religion that is open-ended, one must respect other beliefs." The woman inhaled.

Ambrosia thanked her and walked off, letting her recover her voice. She said to me, "You know, I think this would be the religion for me. Not as a person living here, but you know, pursuing my own truth. When I was walking to that island in midair, the thing that kept me safe wasn't belief in God or Jesus or anything like that. I just knew that the person I wanted to believe in most was you, and I started believing in myself too." She grabbed my hand, "How about we go up, and try again?" After a long hike up several stories, we once again faced the Aiken leader.

The Aiken master spoke to us again, "So, you've heard about our religion? Tell me your answer, do you still believe in your quest?"

AMBROSIA

I so wanted to answer 'no' despite the fact that honestly I was feeling much better now. Not because I believed it anymore, just to see what would happen. Probably, he would just answer "Hmph. I expected better," and I'd have to tell him 'yes' to get anywhere. But I didn't feel that way anymore. Everyone has days where everything just catches up with them and they can't deal with life right now. I've managed to hold on for quite a while because I always believed if I waited long enough, life would start going my way. And recently, I thought it did. Only, this horrible man's questions cast doubt into any sort of purpose for my life. I'm fine now though.

“Yes. I am ready to tell you,” I said. He inquired, “Let's hear it then. Why are you so intent on becoming an Oracle?” I knew he wouldn't go easy on me. He continued, “If you discard your ambition, you could be happy.” I thought of all the people trapped in Opening town, not because they were happy with life there, but because they wanted to leave yet were afraid to. They were trapped inside.

I said loudly, “...” Seeing he wasn't impressed with my answer, I continued, “I've seen people who have discarded their ambition. They seldom look happy. While it's true I could probably have a better life if I were just a farmer or something, I wouldn't trade this life for that.” The master grinned, “Hmmm,” he paused, “interesting. There might be hope for you yet. Please continue. What reason would you have for pursuing the quest of the Oracle?” I thought about the woman's words downstairs. I knew now that it was time to pursue my own truth and not seek after another. I thought about my past as I said the words, “It's true, there are people in the world that probably hindered me while I was on the street. But... On my journey, I met several kind people who have fought with me. I've grown to like them.” I saw Nevras blush at the words.

The Aiken leader said, “This is all very well and good, but what happens next?” Huh? He continued, “After you get all the Crests and stop the great evil demon who returned, then what happens? You grow old and die, with nothing to show for it. People have been doing this since the dawn of time, and death effectively erases all. Everyone you knew, everything you loved, everything you made. Everything you value, all of it will wither and fade away like dust.” I felt my heart racing again. Here he was, trying to push me into a corner again. This time, I couldn't give up. I had to determine how I was going to live my life, and not let someone else decide for me. I had to find meaning in my own life, or I would fall into despair. As I responded, I vaguely remembered passages about “God will give you the words to say” in religious texts. Instinctively, I said, “Not everything.” The Aiken master was caught off guard, and so was I. “Hmmm?” he said. Yet I had no idea where I was going with this.

Somehow I continued, “I heard it from the woman downstairs. There are three sacred things in this life. Those things which are eternal since they renew themselves: Family, Nature, and Love. This is my reason for being an Oracle. I want to live to see a world where I can raise my own children and give them the family I never had. I want to settle down after my journey, and raise a farm that will yield land for generations to come, even those with no relation to me. And I want to... nah, it's silly!” I looked at Nevras, and blushed some more. Any idiot could see what I wanted. The master said, “Hey, you! No blushing during deep religious discussions! But you are correct. This is the best reason to fight as an Oracle. The only problems facing you are whether these things will aid you instead of distracting you, and how to best help humanity with your powers as Oracle. But those are questions for another day. Congratulations! You have earned the right to wield the Crests. You shall travel the world and then return to me when you have seven other Crests. Remember, though, the answer is sometimes closer than you think. I'd suggest looking for the first Crest in our basement.”

Back we marched down the temple to the bottom floor. After 100 floors of walking, we stopped for a quick bite in the kitchen they had built outside, then we told the man guarding the basement stairs to please stand aside. “Are you sure? You're likely to die,” he said. Although we weren't limited to a battle group of four people, Aqorm still elected to stay behind. She said, “Uhhh, guys, I have a long lifespan. It seems a waste to spend it, you know, dying. Plus, this place looks creepy. I'll wait for you to come back up.”

The cave was pretty dank and creepy. The cave was basically a raised winding path with open area and ravines and such. No wonder the Aiken temple was hard to enter. I had serious trouble understanding how such an area would exist without the whole structure caving in, even if the soil was hardened, until I saw them. There were several pillars made from dense mithril metal. Mithril is an alloy of copper, tin, zinc, iron, and lead which is also known as bell metal. It is suitable for pillars supporting massive amounts of weight and like the name, is rather sturdy against strikes. It's a bit of a heavy alloy though, so it's hard to make into a weapon for anyone but dwarves. Near the bridge, these were braced with silver chains, preventing supernatural creatures from crossing. In the distance, I saw a gray tunnel mouth. It looked oddly superimposed, like a painted-on

background, yet I paid little attention to it. There were *things* demanding more of my attention here.

I don't mean figuratively, like pressing concerns, I mean literal things. When we entered, I immediately spied a large number of odd one-eyed crawlers, giant centipedes, bats, and other creatures. It wasn't just crawling beasts either. Off in the distance, the underground path crossed a wooden bridge. On the other side, the dead were rising in a very unsatisfactory way. There were zombies, okay? Zombies were crawling out of the ground, breaking the soil, and shambling towards the bridge in question. I said, "Use your special attacks, Nevras! Take them all out at once." He shook his head. "What's wrong?" I asked. "My techniques, they don't work when it's difficult to see. I have to be able to clearly visualize my opponents or all I can do is use basic attacks, and not very accurately," he explained. I began to sweat, while I worked through plan B, "Okay… Aqorm is gone, Elias can use light/dark effects but he's also an expert at healing and we wanna save him for the zombies, my power is very slow, ummm… Zoe, what exactly can you do?"

Zoe gave us a quick rundown of her abilities, while I vetoed them. "I can use a scythe to swing at a lot of creatures…" "It's dark, and if you miss, you'll get bitten or eaten." "I can fire a bow…" "Same as above." "I can use healing…" "Good, but you'll be backup to Elias." "I can cast effect stuff like vines or mist or poison…" "Good, but let's save some of that for when we can see." "I can do a Sage form, which gives me a super-healing body, high strength and speed, high senses, and I'm generally awesome." "That's great!" "But I haven't learned it yet, only that I'm destined to learn it…" "That's less great." "And I have to be strong enough to use it without turning to stone." "Uhhh, that's actually… kinda sucky. Anything else?" "I case use some elemental magic." I sat and thought while creatures were closing in. Nevras swung his sword, but he was largely just dealing glancing blows in this darkness. Finally, I told her, "Okay, new plan. Elias, you use holy prayers when we get close to those undead, and try to heal when we don't. I'll pass out these mana potions that I kinda sorta stole from the hotel room…" What? Everyone steals from hotel rooms. I continued, "Nevras, since you can't see well enough to attack, just whack stuff that moves with the flat of your sword. Zoe, you can use magic, but not anything that can mess with the bridge until we cross." Zoe nodded. Unlike me, she didn't seem to be impulsive. But then, I was a terrible judge of character.

The creatures edged closer. The eye creeper things appeared to have some sort of paralysis gaze, but in the dark, gaze weapons were kind of limited. The bats were more of a problem, blasting sound waves at us and we had to take cover so they wouldn't bite us. Zoe turned out to have thought this through after all. She avoided using earth, because it wasn't good on flying creatures, and might shake the bridge loose. She also avoided fire and lightning, for obvious reasons. She cast a low power Ice spell, causing the air temperature to lower to just below freezing, and snowflakes formed from the moisture in the air. The bats, shocked by the sudden drop in temperature, were out cold, some of them falling to their doom in mid-flight. The insects went into diapause mode, becoming sluggish but nonetheless surviving the frost. The undead didn't have complete sensory systems, and the cold wasn't quite enough to actually turn bodies brittle, so they were almost unaffected at this temperature. She then made a gust of wind to blow insects and bats into the gorge along with the snow.

As we made it across the bridge, our job got tougher. The zombies slammed hard at us. Elias used some Protection prayer, but the attacks seriously bruised us. Without his support, I was probably looking at broken bones instead. It wasn't really that they were any stronger than humans, but they had no sense of pain and no physiological restraints, so they pushed their body past its normal limits, risking breaks or tears of their own muscles and bones to deliver hits far beyond what were normal. Zoe finally used her Fire spells, to burn some of these to cinders, which ordinarily would be enough, but there seemed to be something continuously reviving the dead. I looked around and saw that a tablet nearby had glowing bluish-white letters. I couldn't read it at this distance, so I focused instead on the battle. "Elias," I called out, "can you use an Exorcism?"

ELIAS

There are many stages of Exorcism, but to be a strong exorcist requires principles that are outside my knowledge. It could be compared asking a mathematician if he could compose a symphony. This skill is technically under the subset of math but not all math-types were naturally any good at them. Exorcism is based not on spiritual strength, but some idea that eludes me. The master exorcists seem to be more charismatic or faith or something. I'm pretty much stuck at ghost sealing, and cannot get any stronger. “Not really,” I said, “you'll need to burn the bodies to ash, and then maybe I can stop the ghosts. The zombies and ghosts don't appear to be able to cross the area, so something tells me this was set up, because the Aiken feared the spirits almost as much as invaders.” I recited the Exorcism aloud, “*Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One. Blessed is His name, whose glorious kingdom is forever and ever.”* Unlike other effects, Exorcism had no set words, as it was more of an art, yet I chose this one over the more popular Kuji-in. Undead, as everyone knows, are part of the dualistic old world where we view life and death, good and evil, as separate things. They are restless beings, kept alive by unfinished business. They are exorcised precisely because these words remind them that we believe in a world where such separations do not truly exist. I only regret that these words were not as effective as they should have been. We instead burned zombies for hours, and Ambrosia took a nearby torch to aid in the process.

The undead continued to come. This area on this side of the bridge may have been their burial site, and some force was raising massive amounts of dead. Scanning the room, I told Ambrosia, “Hurry to that monolith! I'll keep you covered.” I decided to use the Sunrise prayer to dispense with the zombies as well. I was quickly becoming spent between this and treating bite wounds. Nevras couldn't help much, I would be out of mystic power in roughly five minutes, and Zoe was showing signs of strain now too. If Ambrosia failed, all was lost.

AMBROSIA

I hurried over to the tablet thingy. I went with the flow, and even though I could barely see these undead, somehow that didn't matter. They couldn't seem to touch me, as I sidestepped around everything in the room. Honestly, I don't know how I didn't instead step off the edge of the path into the pit below, but somehow I managed. I was in front of the tablet. Only... I couldn't read it. “I need some help here!” I said, waving to Elias. But he was stuck casting prayers against bodies that kept appearing no matter how many he cleansed away with his faith. “I'm stuck here!” he screamed. “They just keep coming...” He was breathing hard from the exertion. I imagine he had been a typical temple priest before all of this, but now he had to adapt to the rapid use of prayers in battle. “I'm all used up,” he said, “I might be able to use a healing prayer or so, but no more holy attacks.” I looked at Nevras in the dim room. From what I could tell, he was shrugging. “I can see shadows and such, flickers of motion, but I can't do more than graze things in the dark. Sorry guys, I feel so useless,” said Nevras.

Zoe, who had been freaking awesome for all this time, groaned, “We may be in trouble. I have maybe three or four uses of my power before I'm out too.” From what I could tell, Zoe's power was extremely efficient. It was versatile, allowing her to focus on a single target or fan it out and it became stronger over time, but this was also its drawback. If she was inexperienced, she could expand and fan out her elemental attacks all she wanted but she would barely be able to light a candle. She had definitely trained a long time to even do this much. I watched her incinerate a few more groups, then the last spark of her power snuffed out, leaving us in complete darkness. Uh oh.

CHAPTER 9

In which Ambrosia gets cool powers, and Queen Victoria is blackmailed.

AQORM

So, you may be asking why I left the group behind on what was obviously a dangerous area. Was I really such a coward, you ask, that I would value long life over the lives of my friends? Well, that's complicated. I very much didn't want leave them, and I had no issues with the dark. In fact, we elves have superior vision in low-light and even

total darkness. There was a specific reason why I chose not to head down there immediately.

I had read novels. While Elias pored over boring nonfiction, I knew from many examples in ancient literature of authors like Terry Brooks's *Sword of Shannara*, that it was an extremely bad idea to enter a room or area as an entire group. Not only did you risk a trapped room that could potentially lock you in forever, but even if there were no traps to speak of, avoiding an ambush was key. I decided to hold off until a certain amount of time passed before I entered.

After waiting maybe a half-hour, I climbed down the stairs and looked around. I can imagine how it looked to people who couldn't see in the dark, but to me it looked downright silly. Elias and Zoe were casting the same effect over and over again, lighting up the room in a small radius for a second or so. Nevras was swinging his sword at anything that moved in a vain attempt to ward it off, and basically swinging wide.

To my eyes, I could perceive that certain things were darker than others, but short of magically-created darkness, nothing was actually blinding or even that hard to see. Instead, I saw color tones in the same hues as one might see in the few minutes after sunset. In other words, it was sort of like how some people had more cones and could see more colors, only for rods. I was a tetrachromat too, meaning not only could I see in the dark, but all colors were in higher vibrancy too. The downside was that my pupils had a longer adjustment period, especially to bright light. After waiting a few minutes to get my eyes right, I rushed forward.

My friends seemed to be trying to get to Ambrosia, who was glaring at some glowing letters on a plaque. I cannot begin to explain how this looked, but I found it embarrassing that human eyes were actually this poor. They couldn't see what seemed so obvious.

My geomancy is kind of a one-trick thing. I can only cast effects that have an affinity to my terrain. On a mountain, I can use stones, in a forest I can use vines, in a snowy area (even a snow mountain or forest) I can create ice and snow. The form of the geomancy was somewhat subjective, meaning that while standing in a plains could allow me to generate air, I could decide the direction and whether it was a whirlwind, a gust of wind, or a crosswind with pressure enough to cut objects. In holy places, I would use holy attacks, while in a pitch dark area, my geomancy would naturally use darkness. Against living creatures in a cave, this was no problem. But this cave had undead, which the geomancy was decidedly worthless against.

Elves had an ability that most other races did not. They could read Fey. Most languages, as you know, are an acquired ability. Fey, however, was a racial language, and it was not spoken, only read. Ostensibly, Fey was a pictographic language, only the pictographs were projected not as sound but as memories. For instance, the written character resembling a 'tree', when read would evoke an image. To a large extent, elves were psychic, in that they could imprint these memories simply by drawing out such images. Two people writing the same pictograph could mean an oak or a maple tree, or one or many trees; only an elf could write like this, and only another elf could interpret, even though the pictographs seemed easy to read.

With this ability, the elves keyed their technology to Fey runes, allowing them to be activated simply by touching the rune. With this ability, I could use elf artifacts to turn the tide of battle in my favor, even an effect that wasn't related to my geomancy. Unfortunately, because I was from a mixed race, I inherited nothing. What, you thought I had some sort of super-cool mystical item? Nah, not a chance.

My geomancy was no good here either. I basically slashed up these undead with my elven blades. The elven metal was effective against all supernatural beings, from demons to undead to other fey. When it touched them, rather than cutting them up like a normal weapon, and having them ignore the pain, they screamed as if still alive, then they crumbled into dust. It couldn't really touch ghosts though. I wound up having to dodge a sword swing or two from Nevras, though, he saw fast movement nearby and raised his sword defensively. “Wait, wait!” I yelled as I did a split to dive under his blade in time. He asked, “What are you doing down there, Aqorm?” I explained most of my reasons above, leaving out some of the more embarrassing motivations. “I'll be okay,” said Nevras, “but Elias needs to get to where Ambrosia is. Can you help him walk over

there?" Moving past the steadily rising undead, I grasped Elias's hand. He said, "I have no mystic power left, but... *Fey Fire*!" I watched with shock as Elias used the grand legacy of the elf race, and without using a trace of mystic power. "What... how did you...?" I saw his nose bleed, as he explained, "In your years of reading, you must surely have heard of Team Abilities."

Ah yes, Team Abilities. A means of using unique abilities or those ordinarily not usable by the caster. It had risks, though, like physical injury or in severe cases it caused pretty bad internal bleeding. Normally, this was done by casting spells in sync with each other, so any boy band or magical girl squad could do that one. But it is said according to legend that if two people are in love, no amount of spell-syncing was necessary, the person could just use the ability. Was Elias... did he have feelings for me?

I watched the effect. This was a spell common to High Elves, which I pretty much couldn't use, though my distant ancestors probably could. Fey Fire is not an actual fire, but a sort of light that not only lights a room but is well suited for getting rid of optical of illusions. As he used it, the room became well-lit. "I can see again!" cried Nevras. He started slashing down undead, even though his sword could not put them down permanently (though since they kept coming, it probably didn't matter). They were beginning to build out of control, but Nevras cleared a path for Elias and I to walk to Ambrosia. Finally, we made it to where she stood.

ELIAS

"Hey, could you read this for me?" Ambrosia said. I looked at the plaque, and read aloud, «Seek the answers within.» As I spoke, the plaque stopped glowing, yet I noticed that Ambrosia instead was glowing. Suddenly, the tablet seemed to vibrate with a strange type of energy. "I understand now!" she exclaimed. "All this time, I was looking to others for my answers. I should have believed more in myself..." The undead in this room suddenly collapsed. In its place, a maelstrom of necromantic energy swirled about the room, cobbling together bones, sinews, tendons, and flesh. The result looked (loosely) like a person. Finally, even the loose metal from fallen explorers pieced together. There was a man riding on some kind of beast, in iron armor, with a bronze *shakujo*, a staff with a six hanging rings inside it. If we ever defeated this guy, I would make this weapon my own. But first, I wisely decided to free up some mystic power by canceling my Exorcism that had been a continuing prayer. It just wasn't much good right now, and even though that only renewed a small amount, it was enough to heal. I needed it after that last move.

I noticed that one of the trigrams on the Crest of her arm had lit up. As before, I suspected Ambrosia had learned a skill in reverse order, but this time it was likely to be handy for us. I wondered what exactly this did.

AMBROSIA

My hand felt like it had some sort of rash. It was tingling like crazy, almost as badly as when I first noticed the Crest. One of the black trigrams on the tattoo had turned white. I suddenly knew what each one meant. I was aware that this was the Heaven trigram, and I had the power of Alexander. I also began to see small threads of the memory I had lost during those six months. I saw... a jacket being given to me, I felt the brush of other lips on mine, and I tasted... the odd taste of Dream Fish. Was this the power of the trigram?

I used the trigram of Alexander. Unlike the Trigrams ritual, which I had decided was impractical for most battles due to its random nature, the power of the Oracles seemed straightforward and simple to use. I did a sort of dance called the Brush Knee Twist Step, which involved waving my hands while turning in a specific pattern. Energy built up, and out came a holy tornado focused on a target at range. The trigram that I used began to shine, and I saw a circle of some sort glow on the ground below me. It looked similar to the tattoo on my hand, except this one had 64 different patterns. From outside the circle, a rush almost like a gust of wind pulsed out and then suddenly there was an intense light.

While I had been building my power, the others were fighting the creature. Nevras had taken a chunk out of the legs of the beast this thing was riding using his Wave Thrust, Zoe was slashing at it with her scythe, and Aqorm had jumped atop the back of the critter and grabbed the undead thing's staff while it was still distracted. Elias had cast what few support abilities he could before his mystic power ran out. Thankfully, since the area was

not crawling with undead, everyone could finally drink some of the potions I gave them.

Mana potions tended to be hard to drink while being attacked, but they were very effective. A person's spiritual essence was relatively hard to restore, unlike their physical health. Some good food, a soak in a hot tub, or some herbal extracts, these would usually start the body on its path to healing. Usually, actually dreaming was required to restore mystic power. From what I learned in my schooling, it was like this: all living things had a spirit given to them by God. The spirit would be able to pray or use runes, or otherwise tap into the divine energy of the universe. Atheists couldn't though, because their concept of reality without belief in God meant that they denied conventional reality for everyone else, giving them a Rival Power of Antimagic. Which is kinda cool, except they completely had no mystic power and couldn't even use secondhand magic, like using teleportation circles or having someone heal them. When the average person slept, their soul would touch the astral plane and be able to refresh their spirit. Although many people believe their prayers were a gift from God, that wasn't directly the case. It was more like the caster and God were partners, one making a renewable space where prayers could be drawn from and the other as conduit for using the energy on Earth. This meant, of course, that mana potions generally weren't used in large quantities, since they were basically a gentle hallucinogen.

Elias and Zoe resumed their casting, using offensive effects on the beast and rider. It was tougher than normal despite both fire and holy attacks having a definite effect. At that moment, however, the wave of light from Alexander's Crest poured into its body. It was as if the body never existed. The flesh was erased from the body, followed by the muscle mass, and then the bones themselves faded from existence. It was like it had never been, all merging into the light. The room was at peace.

After that, we talked to the Aiken master, who congratulated us and reminded us that he would see us when we needed the last trigram. After walking all the way back down, we notified the gatekeepers that we would like to be let out. “Where to next?” I asked Nevras. “Let's talk to my mom and dad,” Nevras said, “they might know something.” This time I understood who they were, so I simply nodded.

The boat ride was fairly quick, as the captain knew what he was doing. We landed on rocky shores in an area that was dreary and dismal. As I was to discover, almost every time we visited Phoenix, it never stopped raining. Something about a sub-climate. Coming to town was difficult, as the constant rain interfered with the casting of thaumaturgy, because active runes are like written words that can be “washed away.” Thankfully, we had some half-decent fighters around now. The island was filled with mycozoe, “animals” made of fungus, who walked around and ate decaying stuff and fecal matter, and “pooped” out soil. Because of their diet, they were relative pacifists, but some were unsafe to eat.

We finally made it to the town proper, a quaint village built along the side of a mountain. Houses littered the sides of the mountain, and there were a few people milling about. Nevras kept pointing out random people, like a wolfman, “This is Admiral 'Blackfang' Johnson. I believe I told you about him, and how he got bitten by valdrserkers during a campaign.” He explained that valdrserkers are those who have mastered a type of nature magic known as Skin Magic, that involves using skins to fully assume the form of a wolf. It gets worse. What made valdrserkers so dangerous was their curse. Most of those who were bitten or scratched by them died instantly, but the rest would become stuck as werewolves.

Next, he pointed to a girl in pigtails who he told us was the owner of a clothing store. Then he showed us an old priest who raised him while his parents were away. Then he pointed to some guy in a jacket, “This is... blast it! I can't be expected to remember every guy here who knows me!” Then we met a woman that Nevras introduced as Koren Mithros. The talked for a while about old times. I kinda ignored them until they made me part of the conversation. He asked her if she had any information about the Oracle.

“Ah, yes!” she said. “The Oracle is said to be master of eight mystical abilities, which act as a key to the Tao. When these keys are in place on the Oracle's body, the Oracle should be able to become the Oracle of Tao. But... the legend says something else is needed to actually use the power.” I could tell there was some information that was just

outside of our reach. Nevras sensed it too, and he pressed her, “C'mon Koren, I know you can remember!” She shook her head and scowled, “Sorry, Nevras, but I was never taught that part of the legend. Nobody was. Since human existence, there has only been one Oracle of Tao, and shortly after realizing his power, he mysteriously disappeared. There just isn't a written record.” She turned directly to me, “But enough about this. Is she your new girlfriend?” She didn't seem jealous, but rather curious. She struck me as the type of former lover who wanted the guy to be happy regardless. I totally did not blush. Nope, not at all. Maybe a little. But it's not like I like him or anything, okay? I managed to get the words out, “I'm...I'm just the Oracle. We're just traveling together, to save the world. That's all.” She laughed at me, “Your blush says otherwise. Well, Nevras, I'm flattered to know you found someone so nice to replace me. And the world will be in capable hands, so long as she keeps her mind on task.” Why does everyone think I was blushing?

NEVRAS

After catching up with an old flame, and seeing the cutest blush on Ambrosia's face, we decided to say nothing of this, and instead wandered the town in silence. The old town inn had turned from a profitable business to a homeless center funded by the local Taoist shrine. There were copies of the *I Ching* and the *Chuang Tzu* strewn about, along with Mohist texts. I checked out the sign to Phoenix, it still read, «Welcome to Phoenix, ~~the town of new sights and sounds~~ home of Nevras, the unstoppable warrior.» I gather being the crown prince did entitle me to a certain amount of slack, but they didn't even think to change it. Ambrosia suppressed a giggle.

After some wandering, I caught sight of my old trainer Kurasawa. He taught me all the techniques I know today. This was a striking man in long brown pants, golden armor, blue gloves, and a green cloak. He wore a sword tied crosswise across his back, angled to easily be drawn. I introduced him, “This is my martial arts tutor, Kurasawa. When I was in the royal army, he taught me my moves.” Kurasawa turned to me, “Not everything. He graduated before I could teach him my final technique. Well? Are you ready to complete your training, Nevras?”

I motioned to the others to back away since the two of us would be fighting alone. I didn't want anyone ruining my training. This battle appeared to outsiders to be moving very quickly, yet to the two of us, every movement seemed an eternity. I used my Speed Slash to cut at him several times, yet such was the expertise of this man that he blocked all of them. “Too slow,” he said, “and you are still too gentle a swordsman. If that had connected, I would still have only a scratch on me.” We traded blows, parrying each other's attacks before they did any major damage. I attacked him with the Standing Jump Thrust, but he scoffed, and turned it aside with a quick slash. “No,” he scolded, “that is not the way I taught you to do this technique. It is good that you know it, but it puts you at a disadvantage.” I was confused, so I asked, “How is that?” He explained, “It makes you a sitting duck. I always taught you to dodge and attack, so you should only use that when are forced into a corner. You simply do not have the body weight to use this like that.” He stopped the battle to show me how to adapt this technique to my personal strengths, shifting my weight forward, and then using my speed instead of strength to add power to the attack.

We resumed the battle, having a heated battle of techniques. He knocked away my Pierce attack with a well-timed Speed Slash, and then blocked my Wave Thrust with one of his own. Yet our strength clearly was not on the same level. When our two attacks touched, he was largely unaffected except for a slight scratch, yet I was knocked back and cut in several places. I noticed he was holding back, but I felt weak in comparison. I decided to try the technique I had seen from Sera. “*Vacuum Slice!*” I screamed, turning the blade black and sending out a swipe of antimatter. Kurasawa was actually frightened, and lunged out of the way. “Hey, whoa!” he exclaimed. “That technique... I didn't teach you instant kill moves. Where did you learn this?” I explained my encounter with Sera and Phim. He scolded me, “You shouldn't use that on people. Not unless you have no other options...” then he continued, “but learning an advanced skill like that... You are finally ready to learn my ultimate technique. You remember my teaching method. Learn by watching.”

I saw the attack as it formed. This attack clearly required much longer to prepare than normal, leaving him open to attack. I was frightened by the sheer power of his battle aura. I knew instinctively that this was the legendary Dragon Roar. I saw how he built so much power, I saw the strain it put on his body, and I saw him thrust forward, releasing all of his energy.

What happened to me? I felt like I had been dreaming for a long time. Hours later, I was sitting at a priest's temple. “You were lucky!” Ambrosia said, with a concerned look on her face. “There was a priest here that could actually manage to perform a revival. Be careful, okay?” I felt a lapse in memory, and no, I don't recall any near-death experience. It was like this during a revival. You usually didn't get to experience the Afterlife and live to tell of it, because after the practice of revival became common, it was common for entrance into the Afterlife to be delayed three days, until rot set in. Of course, adventurers would sometimes just return to the save point or temple, ignoring an Afterlife entirely until they were tired of this life.

I remembered everything about the technique. Kurasawa was at the foot of my bed, along with Elias and the others. “You have done well to survive my attacks,” he said. He continued as I nodded or shook my head to individual questions. I could not yet speak as the revival sickness had not worn off. He explained, “This technique will be very effective if ever you find dragons in your quest. Be careful not to use it on regular humans, for the power is great enough to seriously kill them. From now on, you should travel the land learning new skills from local masters. One day, you shall be able to learn your own ultimate technique...” Ultimate techniques. Each one, much like a signature, was unique to the user. Could I really become a master swordsman? After a long period of rest and recovery, I got back on my feet, and returned to our journey.

AMBROSIA

I was so relieved! After that awful man stabbed Nevras right through the chest, I was about ready to kill him. Elias, Zoe, and Aqorm helped me haul his body to the priest. I had carried him before, so I knew he was actually fairly light. But we were also carrying all of his armor and gear, since I wasn't about to leave it hanging around. We watched the priests perform the ceremony of resurrection. There isn't really a way to adequately describe a revival without either making it sound horribly sterile or going into grand descriptions of religion, so I'll just describe the event as it happened.

ELIAS

Revival is not a sure thing. If the body had decayed or was turned to dust, it would take a resurrection to bring them back. And even if the body was intact, the person had to *want* to come back. There is Revive prayer performed by priests, and then there is resurrection which allows even a badly wounded or completely destroyed body to be brought back, and then there is the *true* version of resurrection, which to my knowledge has only happened once, when Jesus came back to life. Needless to say, nobody really knows how that one works, but he pretty much is back now, so I suppose I could ask him. The priest's variety could best be described as merely an analogy for the real thing, the conquering of death completely. Yet that was a miracle, this is a ritual. Every time that I perform this, an important or valuable thing is sacrificed. In the old days, some people wanted to sacrifice their own lives to bring back loved ones. I cannot imagine how that would help anyone. Loved ones would much prefer their beloved to be here with them. Nowadays, it was usually jewelry, or in some cases a particularly treasured memento. I even heard that some people put their own memories into the ritual, losing pieces of their past.

AMBROSIA

Elias sacrificed a treasured book that he had collected in his childhood, in order to do the resurrection. Poor guy. This book looked like it had only been printed once. The priest said some words and I saw a thin beam of light shine on Nevras. I'd like to say that angels or some other divine event happened, but... time somehow jumped forward despite all of us watching intently.

Our lives should have been changed forever by watching a resurrection, but honestly,

I just wanted to return to my mission. We walked along the island, through heavy grass while torrential rain poured on our heads. We swam through muddy areas where leeches had to later be picked off. We set up the tent and organized our supplies. Finally, we made it to a bridge.

The bridge was clearly necessary. Many of us were halfway decent swimmers, but there were high cliffs on either side of the water. Falling in from that height would probably be very painful. The bridge was a typical wood slat and rope bridge, but it was far from one of these old worn out things. No expense had be spared in keeping it in good repair and there was even a troll collector. I mean toll collector. The large oni had deep red skin, and a large metal club which he appeared to be good at. The sign next to him read, «Pay the troll his due, or he'll stomp all over you!» Catchy! The toll came out to be 5000 Gold, including a pass for return trips. We could have paid him or fought him, but it was kind of a lot of money. I asked Nevras, “So... should we pay this guy or fight?”

NEVRAS

I don't often appear angry. Depressed, yes, sometimes, but more often than not, I just seem calm and under control. A prince or princess should never show their feelings, I was told. Or that it would be impolite to become angry at one's subjects. Yet all of my life, it was endless training in court etiquette or how to be tactful during negotiations or table manners, or any number of things that simply boiled do to “don't act out, restrain yourself.” I was taught by Kurasawa that even while fighting, not to use my techniques to cause death, if I could help it. I was the crown prince, yet I was always treated like a leashed dog. I never was allowed to be a kid during childhood, and I was never allowed the rebellious teenage years either. When I acted up, I was shut down. Anger? Yes, I knew about anger. But it was usually well-hidden, and “safely” directed at myself. I didn't know how to use it appropriately. I had been taught to channel anger by my parents to avoid losing my temper inappropriately. Which ideally was what usually happened. What was left was an *emptiness*. I cannot be sure whether this truly was the best method of coping, but I no longer felt angry afterward, I guess. I no longer felt anything.

I loathe bullies, and even more than that, I was approaching our kingdom and... I don't wanna talk about it. So trust me when I say that seeing this big brute who was not our people extort visitors to the palace was making me more than a little pissed off. *Empty it out,* I thought to myself. Even if we paid, everyone after would *also* be hit up for money, and beaten to a pulp if they couldn't pay. I attacked.

Oni are not like other trolls. They aren't weak to fire, they are living but darkness-aligned, so he was resistant to basically all of Elias's offensive prayers. They cannot regenerate detached limbs, but they can reattach them and they do still have fast healing. The others backed me up with thaumaturgy and attacks when they saw me pull my sword, but the attacks only slowed him down. It was time to use the Vacuum Slice.

The Vacuum Slice is actually creepy to behold when used to its full potential. I agree with Kurasawa, I cannot imagine using this on a person, or in fact anything besides a troll, robot, or undead. The blade glowed black as I swung through limbs, torso, shoulders, and finally the head. Because of the Void aura, these were cut through cleanly, as if they were the sharpest knife in the world. Well, cut isn't the right word, more like sucked matter away. Oni were tough, and well able to piece themselves together, but running water is fatal to oni. I tossed the chunks into the river below and walked on. The others just stared.

Ambrosia seemed concerned, but then concern gave way to disgust. No, not, “you're horrible person, and you disgust me” disgust. The kind that was more, “I have to pretend to go somewhere for another reason, then probably throw up.” She had just seen someone turned from a large hulk into a mass of limbs and organs in just a few seconds. To be honest, I was disgusted with myself too. But the other kind.

After she gathered her stomach, she decided to talk to me about it. “Are you okay?” asked Ambrosia. I sobbed, “It wasn't even about the oni thing. I'm just really stressed about meeting my folks, and this critter rubbed me the wrong way, and...” Ambrosia gave me a long hug. “Shh,” she placated, “you don't have to say anything more.”

AMBROSIA

We walked in silence across the bridge to the castle. It was a long winding road through wooded area. Like the other side of the island, it was rainforest, but this area was covered with trees, and damp fallen logs, moss, and sludge. It was slow going for an area that was close enough to be seen. I was constantly worried that some critter would jump out at us, and we'd be unable to use magic because of the rain.

The palace could have been straight out of a fairytale. There were spires and balconies and all sorts of other features. It even looked like they had a sun roof in one area. Behind the castle, a garden covered with wildflowers grew. “This is where I grew up,” Nevras explained. “Wow! Nice-” Aqorm cut me off, “Nice shack!” Nevras glared at her. I muttered, “I wish I remembered where I was born...”

A distant memory tugged at me. I saw the vague image of an old temple. It was one of those with columns and triangular arches. Uhhh a Greek style? Atop the building were stone angels with a shield and spear. Standing beneath such arches, I saw my mother with her deep red hair covered by a blue bandanna and a simple brown dress. She appeared to be managing the temple. She was beautiful. But when I tried to remember my father, things became fuzzy. I could vaguely see something, but it was like I was viewing through static, and I couldn't remember anything said...

The inside of the palace was like a small shopping mall. It was laid out in wide open floors and there were stairs to upper areas with only a few rooms. The lobby floor had a kitchen with a dumbwaiter for sending food up to any floor, a bedroom for the maids (many of who bore more than a passing resemblance to Nevras, although they had apparently dyed and styled their hair to look otherwise). “The area over there,” he pointed, “leads to the basement. We have a prison down there.” Aqorm wanted to go, and made it clear from her constant requests that she would likely keep asking.

“Leave us,” Nevras said to the prison guards. It was clear that a royal prison was far nicer than a regular prison. Not more comfortable for the prisoners, of course, but just generally looked far more clean, well lit, and less filthy than one would expect. The prison was designed so the prisoners which were known to rape or otherwise hurt others were in separate cells, while those who got along with each other were stuck together.

There were about four beings in the room. To the left end in a separate cell was a hardened criminal. In the group cell, there was a young woman, who was only guilty of the small crime of stealing a loaf of bread to feed a family. There was a little girl who was locked up for selling First Material. This wasn't a crime, but stealing it from the palace was. And there was a floating mass of fire. I asked, “What exactly is that?” Elias explained, “This is a remnant, the spiritual remainder of a soul with a strong emotional attachment to a place.” Aqorm unlocked the prison gates, and called out to the prisoners, “Anyone want to come out? This is the prince right here, I'm sure he'll forgive your crimes.” Nevras glared at her for a second, before shrugging and nodding.

The hardened criminal was receiving free food and clothing and a place to rest. This was paid for as part of a merchant's initiative, they paid for these prisons in order to keep themselves safe from theft and murder. The little girl could hawk her wares to any visitor who stopped by the prison. The spirit would not depart either. Except for the woman, everyone was happy to stay in this prison. “Nobody else will leave?” Nevras asked, “Prisoner 24601, what is your name? You are free to go.” She introduced herself as Jean. I didn't catch her last name. He gave her a royal issue of exoneration, meaning even if the guards caught her, they couldn't hold her anymore. Elias seemed to be pleased with Aqorm's actions, even though I couldn't imagine why. I couldn't imagine someone like that being okay with setting potentially dangerous criminals loose.

We moved from the basement to the second floor. This floor appeared to showcase the Phoenix castle's vast wealth. The entire floor lacked windows of the first floor yet was lit instead by a Glow Orb. These things were very handy to have around, but the original inventor was apparently selling them at a huge profit. I was hoping soon they would become publicly affordable, but it might be a while before I could own one.

Around the room, treasures of all sorts were scattered about the area. Some were medals of great achievement, such as medals of honor for stopping wars and helping to set up the Council; on the other end of the spectrum were heirlooms from shameful eras. Massive amounts of fur from the fur trade, Nazi gold, and a piece of ivory artwork from

the UN all lined this area. The weirdest object was a pouch of 30 coins of pure silver covered with what appeared to be an aura of darkness. The coins periodically trickled through the bag to a basin below. Was that blood?!? Nevras emptied the basin to feed a tree which glowed brightly, before facing away from all of these things. Before we left, I noticed a floor-length mirror that was probably worth more than my life. He urged me onward, into a small room off to the side. “Come,” he said.

The room here was not gaudy or ostentatious. It was a small, dimly-lit room containing only one treasure chest. I wondered why he wanted this above all other treasures. He explained, “If we are to complete this quest, we'll probably need this. This is our most precious royal treasure, the Gigas Gloves. We'll need strength for our journey, to move away obstacles.”

Finally, we arrived at the top floor of the palace. To either side of the room stood the royal guard. Nevras had already mentioned Komogu, who was more feminine looking in person. Next was Numin, the only female in the group, and who Nevras had apparently dated at one point. Then, there was Dashino, a man who looked like a mad scientist and kept talking about events that were about 2000 years before his time as though he had personal knowledge of them. There wasn't a sane one among them, besides Numin, and I hated her.

I looked towards the throne, and then back to Nevras. He seemed visibly afraid of his folks. “What's up?” I asked. Nevras stopped cringing long enough to tell me, “For years my parents made me feel unworthy. 'This isn't what to do' or 'That isn't right' or 'You need to do this better' and that was when they weren't outright upset with me. When they were, they might even shout at me. And I lived in mortal fear of them discovering my secret stash of royal dresses and gowns. They would probably kill me.” I led him back downstairs for a second, and talked him through this. “Look, Nevras,” I said, “I didn't have a ton of time with my parents, but I know they could be strict at times, even if they were the sweetest people. Not everyone grows the same way, there are all kinds of parents and children so I can't really speak for everyone. But most healthy parents want you to learn and grow. And I think if you tried having a positive attitude and just telling them how you really feel, they might surprise you. Just talk to them, you'll see.” Nevras's face brightened, “Are you sure?”

“What, do I look like a psychic? No, I'm not sure!” I responded. We went back to the throne room. Nevras struggled to speak, but I grabbed his shoulder, letting him know I was there for him. He placed his arm around my waist.

We talked to King Charis first. Nevras said, “I have something to confess, all of this time I've been hiding who I really am...” King Charis shrugged, “Nevras, we knew about your genetic condition, and we have known for years about your crossdressing. We have always loved you, and always will. I'm sorry we pushed you so hard, we just were afraid you wouldn't make a strong ruler.” They said ruler, not 'king'. The meaning was not lost on me, though Nevras appeared to have not noticed, so great was his shock about being caught. Gradually, Nevras spoke, “Years? And you never commented at all?” King Charis responded, “It simply wasn't important. Whether you want to become a girl, if this is a phase, or whatever else, we will always love you. I know my wife comes across as harsh, but as you know, it takes a tough ruler to make a tender kingdom.”

He noticed me, and more importantly, where our arms were. “Is she the one whom you will marry? Phoenix would be glad to have you as ruler, Miss...” I was shocked on several levels. First, that we would marry. We had been kinda tight for a while now, even though my memories still weren't up to par, but *marriage*? I just couldn't think about that.

I addressed the other issue I had, instead, “Ummm, up until a few months ago, I was a beggar on the streets.” He faux-gasped, “A commoner? Whatever will we do?” Okay, maybe he didn't need to be quite that sarcastic.

“She's the Oracle of Tao, and we're traveling together on a quest, we like each other, but we're still dealing with issues,” Nevras explained. The King nodded, “Oh, I see. Well, you know I'm just a figurehead. It you want anything real done, talk to the queen. Unless... is there anything else we can do for you?” I pulled out some embarrassing pictures of Nevras. “Ah, I see. Blackmail, is it? Well, I don't really handle the purse strings, but I will arrange to set up an offshore account in Kushiyama of about 50 million

Gold. And I will need the negatives too," he said as he calmly wiped out all pictures from my cellphone, then smashed it with his heel. Through all of this, I never saw anger or heard a raised voice. Creepy. "Great! Now, Nevras, in exchange for this money, you will need forfeit your Royal Crest now. You understand, I cannot continue to pay money now. Should you decide to rule, both are yours. But you will always be welcome in this household, regardless of your decision," he said, directing us to talk to his wife.

NEVRAS

It may surprise people to know that I do not identify as a girl, nor do I want a sex change. In the early 21st century, a rash of people due to political propaganda believed that they were *really* a girl trapped in a boy's body or vice versa. This was either a lie, or an outright delusion. The truth was more complicated, because the truth was this was a large-scale State trick. First, convince people that who they are is wrong, then convince that their group should have rights, when actually their *real* right to procreate was being taken away. This was a fancy way of castrating the population, in order to further marginalize people. In essence, this "surgery" left them worse off than when they started. When a gender revolution began in earnest, the first thing they did was do away with gendered restrooms, and to make a sex change that actually worked.

The reason given was no longer that people believed that they *were* really the opposite sex, and more that they *wanted to be* the opposite sex. This statement had a chance of actually being true, and as a result had a far greater appeal than things like "social justice." The actual process of a sex change now involves something very akin to a cocoon. It wasn't homosexuality, it wasn't forbidden under Deuteronomy 22:5, it produced families that could have children, and aside from the initial act of wanting to be the opposite gender, it didn't even seem to be at odds with what God wanted (since it was produced through thaumaturgy). It was initially rejected because people had childhood friends of the same sex that suddenly became eligible for dating them. Nowadays, I haven't met a single person with a strong objection to it. Ironically, a person like me who did not want to become female, yet very much enjoyed women's clothes, was still very much an outcast. At least, this is what I felt. Even if they do accept me, I still have trouble feeling comfortable in my own skin.

Despite for the first time feeling like I wasn't a horrible sinner, because I was loved despite everything, I was still filled with fear when facing my mother. I'm sorry, maybe it was those years of training... I can't even pick up a fork without worrying whether it is the salad fork or a dinner fork. To my great relief, my mother, Queen Victoria spoke first. "Crown Heir Nevrasia Astra Fitz Embor Phoenix III," she said, filling me with even more fear, as she hardly ever used my full name unless matters seemed serious, "what exactly have you been up to?" Ambrosia questioned me, "Why is your mom using that cute name I gave you in the marketplace?"

CHAPTER 10

In which Ambrosia meets Azrael, and together they disrupt local tourism.

AMBROSIA

As Victoria held Nevras transfixed for a fair amount of time, I broke the silence. I explained that our quest involved visiting out of the way shrines. She rolled her eyes at Nevras, "You needn't be so afraid of me, my child." I suspected that much of his fear was remembered far worse than it actually was, yet I said nothing. Somehow or other, Nevras finally had the nerve to speak, "It is as she says, Your Majesty. For long I have traveled this one, although six months were lost to amnesia due to the workings of her power. She... she is dear to me, and I would see that her mission is completed." Vicky smiled, setting everyone at ease. Although from his reaction to her, I was sure she certainly could be intimidating, I imagine she also had the skill of charm and kindness, and probably organized trips where she did nothing but that odd style of waving common for those of nobility. "I know of one," she said, "but you will need to head south of the palace through dangerous territory for that shrine."

She wasn't kidding. Although we stopped for a brief period to have a look at Nevras's

room (huge bed, loads of princess books, and a closet filled with men's clothes poorly shoved in front of gowns in a vain attempt to hide them were the highlights), the trip to the temple managed to be annoyingly difficult. There were the lesser ghouls, who Rejuvenated again and again and again, finally forcing us to flee, since we had no way of putting them down for good. To say nothing of the high fail chance for spells with the rain stopping and starting. After this, we had a group of mutant alligators, flying jack o'lanterns, and a carbuncle challenged us. Carbuncles are not to be confused with the horrific welt on the human body, these were cute furry critters that only had a red sore in common, and had an ability to redirect runes back at their source. The alligators had sharp teeth and tough skin, making them difficult to cut with most weapons. The jack o'lanterns were pumpkins surrounding a spirit of fire within, making them impossible to attack physically, and they could use nature magic of flame and wood. They were an annoyingly synchronized team, since they covered each other's weaknesses. We basically had to pick apart their defenses on by one: Nevras and Aqorm slashed at the carbuncle until it was gone, Zoe used Ice on the jack o'lanterns and Lightning on the alligators. We couldn't exactly train against them thanks to this weather though. We had some nice pumpkin and some alligator skin and meat. I didn't get much of a chance to use my cool powers, but it didn't matter. We had a good team. While crows ripped the flesh from the cute little carbuncle, we continued on until finally reaching the temple.

The temple cut into the nearby forest of what looked to be mostly evergreens, even though this was probably too warm an area for them to do well. They must have been planted by the temple's owner. The temple was... stupid-looking. I mean, really stupid-looking. It roughly resembled a step-pyramid on the outside, but only extended about three levels. It also was made not of limestone, as was typically ideal for that sort of thing, but the sort of rough ugly granite that was favored in functional architecture of the modern and postmodern eras of Earth. It had an opening in the bottom floor, but it seemed clear that this building was designed to keep people *out*.

Inside the “temple” was a small room with a man standing in front of a large mirror. There was a bookcase off to the side, and the typical statues that one might expect for a temple, but aside from an excess of candelabras resting on the stone floor, it was slightly underwhelming. I was looking at the man in the mirror and asking him to change his ways. He asked us to immediately stop singing.

“I am the Oracle of Apollo. You are those who seek to understand the power of the Oracle,” he said. I was struck at how imposing this mirror was in regards to the rest of the room, as I almost paid more attention to it than him. “You should know that the power of the Oracle is not for dealing death, but to preserve life. As it is said,
I have heard that those who are expert in handling life,
Can travel the land without meeting tigers and rhinos,
Can enter battle without being wounded.
The rhino has no place to plant its horn,
The tiger has no place to place its claws,
Weapons find no place to rest their edges.
Why? Because he has no death ground.

He continued, “I will summon my nothingness to do battle with you. If you are really for nonviolence, you must fight it and prove it to me!” Anyone else see a contradiction here?

Nevras and the others pulled out their weapons ready to fight whatever came. The man, meanwhile summoned something I guess as he made a whole fuss about “Nothing, I summon thee!” then did some sort of creepy trick, and stepped inside the surface of the mirror causing it to steadily glow a golden hue. Granted they couldn't see the nothing that was summoned, but they were all ready to blast whatever it wasn't to nothing with their magic. In one of my prouder moments, I realized that maybe it was better *not* to rush into battle. “Hold on! Hold on!!! There's something not right here,” I interrupted.

“Look guys, I think he summoned nothing,” I explained. Aqorm shrugged, “Well, yeah, he told us that he'd summoned Nothing to attack.” I explained with difficulty, “No, I mean, I think he summoned **nothing.** If we attack now, it won't hit. That glowing mirror has some sort of power, and we don't want to find out what happens if you hit it with your

attacks." Aqorm nodded. "So we should just sit here and not attack," I said.

He reappeared after awhile of this, and awarded me his Crest. My hand again began to tingle and another trigram started to glow. He explained, "The power I give you is not an offensive one, but for protection against harm. Your adversaries will destroy themselves if they should try to attack someone who does not fight back." I tried it out. It was the Cross Hands position, making an X near my chest area. I couldn't figure out the whole stepping inside of mirrors thing, but as long as I held my hands in a guarded position, a golden aura maintained itself around me. It blocked physical attacks, and turned techniques and magic back at their source. I could move freely, but if I tried to fight back or tried to use my other trigram abilities, this aura would go away. I could still dodge though. Among my trigram abilities, it was much faster to activate than the others.

After healing their wounds (from testing it out on me), we continued back to the nearest port. It was a very hard journey between mudslides, attacking creatures, and endless obstruction from rain and old vegetation. Thanks to my new powers, I wound up relatively unmolested walking about with a golden glow all around me, and the others figured out that they could reap the benefits of my defensive barrier simply by touching me. We were a team now, so those things that presented such a challenge before didn't seem so harsh. Except for ghouls. Even when I used Alexander's trigram, the ghouls kept coming back. "At some point, we need a decent exorcist," I said. We made it to the port. Although I would love to have this 50 million right now to spend, it was tied up in an account that we couldn't easily access. Anyway, this money was for big expenses only, as a sort of insurance. The port had two destinations, the town of Goji or Gruumi (it rhymed with "crummy"). Zoe offered, "If you're looking for an exorcist, I know there's one in Goji." I didn't ask how she knew this, though looking back, maybe I should have.

During the boat trip, more memories gradually came. I had a firmer grasp now of generally what happened during the six months I had lost, roughly enough that I felt now like I had actually lived it. I remembered the conversations we had. I remembered the day he had given me the sweater, and I remembered the almost-kiss we had shared before getting interrupted. I remembered something else too. I saw myself as a young child with my mother. I remember the temple, and the road leading up to it. But first and foremost, I remember Mama. I used to love it spending time in the temple with my mother. I liked my adopted parents too, but now that I remember my mother, all the experiences there were so much better. But one day, without explanation, we left. It was a cold winter day when I arrived at their doorstep in Galaxia... I remember being handed off to my new parents. But I don't know why it was that I was adopted in the first place... Did my mom not want me? I remember my words back then, as she told me, "Ambrosia, this will be your new mom and dad." I begged, "But I wanna stay with you, Mommy!" Tears streamed down her face as she said, "I can't be your mother anymore, Ambrosia!" I saw her running away as the door was answered.

The boat rocked. I said nothing to the others about what I had remembered. Instead, I searched for a spot on the boat where I could safely cry myself to sleep. Nevras would never understand... As the boat drifted along, I caught a glimpse of the land we were headed to. It was a massive octopus-shaped island filled mostly with desert. To the east, I saw a gigantic building. To our direct south there were two "eyes" of fertile land where an oasis formed. There were towns built on each, but the right one was the town of Goji.

The town of Goji was a narrow port. A bridge docked the ship, and water nourished the area just enough that crops could grow, as the salt water and freshwater mixed. The buildings had distinctive curved arch roofs, and the people wore very traditional Japanese-style clothing. There were men and women in kimono, samurai in topknot, and traditional gardening styles from east Asia. I decided to stop asking questions about how such a place could exist, surrounded by desert. The air had a strange heavy feel to it, almost like it was clogged with energy. "Aura," Elias explained, "runes have been used to such an extent that the area resonates on its own. That's what all of you are feeling. This town is thick with leftovers. Remember, human beings can change their surroundings, just by being there. The land is so moist because humans reside in this area, not the other way around." He explained that magic came from two major sources, ambient energy (aura) and inscribed energy (runes). Aura was more difficult to get rid of, even in

antimagic areas.

As we milled around town talking to random people, Zoe's eyes locked on someone. They seemed to be in a staring contest, as neither one blinked or turned away. Then the girl approached us. Her hair was in a partial ponytail with the sides remaining untied. She wore what looked like a *miko* outfit, only rather than the red and white classic colors, it was instead more of a cute pink tone. She wore sandals, which strapped loosely between her big toe and her second. She had a belt across her shoulder where a sword and a bell were strung. The bell flowed with runes of all sorts but it was clearly kept from ringing on its own. She had an ordinary face, not particularly attractive but not exactly plain either. It was more the face one would expect to see of a priest or scholar than a supermodel though. Despite this, it appeared as though Zoe was already fascinated with her. I wonder why.

AQORM

I had hoped that we would instead take a boat ride to Gruumi. I was anxious to see where Elias had been raised and started his training. Well, we'd have to cross a mountain to see it, but anyway. The Great Library was said to be devoted entirely to books. I wanted to know more about my man, but instead we were in this place. Anyway, this woman standing here took a long while to speak. She seemed to be debating something with herself before finally making her way towards us.

ZOE

I knew this woman from the moment I saw her. As discussed in the *Eternity Epic*, I was fated to meet her again and again. I was reincarnated from Zhanshi Xianzhe, the sage warrior. I was the one that when other warriors refused to surrender, I stopped them simply by turning their weapons into flowers. The love of my life at the time had been Reqing Mei, a beautiful woman with herbalist abilities. We had repeated life together, always falling in love again, yet never ending up together. Something would always intervene. I knew this life of hers, she was called Azrael, and was a talented exorcist. But I knew that our proximity to each other would likely hurt both of us, unless we managed to resolve our issues.

AZRAEL

All that lives is divided into four parts: body, spirit, soul, and name. Body gives things solid form and perception of the physical world. Spirit allows living things to... well, live. These two are so strongly connected that many materialists and even some religions believe that there is no separation. This means many religions are obsessed with the physical world, with following rules like washing hands or saying the right words, while rejecting things that are beyond this world. But the spirit can be separated into an astral body; it can do things like thaumaturgy, and it gives them a complicated chakra system.

Soul gives access to the Afterlife, and a ball-shaped soul evolves after death into a new etheric body. It is important to know that neither death, nor anything you wear, nor anything you touch, nor anything you eat, nothing that enters your body can affect your soul, and thus you should fear nobody who attempts to harm you. You should instead only concern yourself with preventing yourself from being overcome by negative energies such as greed, fear, rage, depression, and despair. The soul is immortal, but negative emotions like fear can make a pleasant world into a source of torment.

Lastly, names are part of the magic of True Names, they make a soul distinct from another, and they give a sense of long term presence to living things. Angels often do not have names, so fade in and out of existence. This is the anatomy of the spirit, and it is key to understanding Exorcism.

It is not my wish to create problems for other living things. My quarrel is with the undead. Those who violate the sacred trust ordained by God shall ever meet my wrath and indignation. They shall find no rest, until I put them forcibly to rest with my sacred mantra, the Kuji-In, "*Rin Pyou Tou Sha Kai Chin Retsu Zai Zen*!" Using my Exorcism chant, I could not only get rid of spirits and even corporeal undead, but I was learning how to use it to sweep away auras and dismiss Rival Powers or Monsters.

I had grown up in this town. These townsfolk were good people, but they always

relied on me when there's something strange in the neighborhood. They were always calling on me, for this zombie or that ghost. I loved them. But this was wearisome. I longed to have my own life, to fall in love with a woman, especially *that* woman. Yes, I was a lesbian... I just hadn't found any men who saw me besides my face and my body.

I did not remember much at all about past lives but I did have one strong memory. I had a recurring dream. I saw a woman who would wield the Sword of Sorrow, and she was asking me to come with her; she was asking to be with her for life. I was just a girl then, but the dream continued up until yesterday. I had trained hard, learning many prayers and rituals, strengthening my Exorcism ability.

Exorcism, it is said, is a difficult ability to improve. It requires not knowledge of magic, but an understanding of life and death. It requires a sense of purpose, that one is doing the correct thing. Many of those who attempt to learn it never get better because they fixate on trying to use more mystic power as though one could blow up ghosts with unfinished business into bits. That attempt only drives them away. Rather, Exorcism is about gentleness, and is intended to persuade a creature to pass on. It didn't always work, though. There was also Purification, which cleansed the spirit so it didn't come back, and redeemed its karma so that it could be reborn into something better. There were certain times where Purification was necessary, but Exorcism was far easier to do.

Exorcism meant that even the most corrupt spirits could convinced not to trouble the living anymore, but would follow their own ambitions and dreams. A skillful exorcist was kind yet firm, because, as my old master explained to me, nothing in this world was actually evil nor was anything truly good, because evil came from self-hatred. An exorcist therefore was required to tell an undead thing that (1) it could not remain here, (2) it had to complete its unresolved goals and pass on, and (3) it had nothing to be ashamed of. The last one was important, as many undead were twisted into ugly things by their shame. A man who mourned his cat dying, might for instance have a strong leonine aspect when they became a zombie. I had, in fact, defeated such a creature, not by any special power, but by understanding its feelings. All of this was not said by words at all, but through the emotions I put forth in the Exorcism. The cat split off as it exorcised, and I saw the man as he really was. A Monster was not much different. They were hard for me to exorcise right now, but I was getting better. They were nothing more than stray feelings of fear or guilt or remorse, which had been allowed to consume living things.

I had just happened upon a theory for better dealing with such Monsters today, when I saw a girl and her entourage entering town. They all were obviously together, but I noticed only one of them. It was *her*. You know, the one that I had been looking for.

I lied, “I've had my eye on you people for quite some time...” And then I guessed, based on their general appearance and numerous legends I had heard about the Oracle, “You guys are on the quest to collect the Oracle's Crests, correct?” Part of my training as a spiritualist was to give cold reads based on hunches and minor information. I could tell from their faces that I had made a decent guess.

As I could tell that I had a captive audience, I requested, “I shall help you, if you will let me defeat a certain demon called Belial. You heard about what happened to Earth's religions, right?” Everyone knew this story. The blue-haired one nodded, “Yea, I heard... One day most of the people vanished.” I said, “I know the reason why all of the people disappeared that day.” The girl that I would later know as Ambrosia gasped, “What?!? Why?” I honestly do not know next if I lied or not, for this is a legend of my people. I explained, “The demon named Belial sought to free itself from the Void. To do this, much of the Earth got absorbed into the fabric of the Void. Entire towns were lost, sometimes even entire countries. And all this energy went to breaking the divide between this world and the Realm of Void. Of course, the angels wouldn't take this lying down. Michael and another angel named Estheriel came and sealed the demon Belial in a magic urn.” She asked, “Then your job should be done, right?” Well, no.

GOD

As I explained earlier with regard to Earth's history, nothing like that remotely happened. I caused the split, not Belial. Belial did have a hand in polluting the Earth, and did manage to create a great deal of death. But Belial destroyed no religious people

except those immediately near him, and his main role had been to aid the one known as Ungorr. The disappearance of those on Earth had been to the fulfillment of their respective end-times prophecies. For that matter, the chronology was completely wrong. Not that I blame her, much of this was at the end of recorded human history for the original Earth. About the only thing that *was* right was that Michael and Estheriel helped me, although I also don't know how she would have known this, since I didn't reveal it to her, and neither did any normal humans know the name of the angel Estheriel. Only I and my Reapers, and mortals who had visited Heaven should have been privy to that information. Who was this girl? As she aroused my interest, I listened closely to the conversation.

She explained, " I wish it were that simple. We've heard reports that someone is collecting the keys to unlocking the urn Belial was sealed in. I need your help to stop it, **before it's too late**." Wow, someone has a flair for the dramatic. Everyone did introductions, and then she took the group down a deep well to finish a task for the town. The ghost was fearsome and angry but her authority and her kind and gentle voice released it from its earthly bonds. And so it was that she had no further duties to the town. She was given her paycheck, and elected to keep company with Zoe.

AMBROSIA

We thought about exploring the surrounding area, but seeing as how it was desert, we got in our tent until night fell, before doing exploring of any kind. But of course, at night we had to watch out for snakes and scorpions. Azrael assured us that she knew this area quite well, as another life ago she had traveled the world before. She said that it didn't matter where a person went if they were with people they cared about, so she had returned to Goji to stay there until the love of her life came. I wonder why she was suddenly leaving now, then?

She guided us through the desert. "Is this the right way to the nearest Oracle's shrine?" I asked her. She shook her head, "That? No, we're headed in the opposite direction." I kinda lost my temper here, "**What?!?**" I was ready to kill her.

AZRAEL

She was ready to kill me. Right now, in fact, since we were now wandering in the dark through a desert filled with scorpions and other things best left unmentioned, including actual *afārīt* (those fire spirits, just one is called an *ifrīt*). I had just met her, and already I feared her worse than some of the things in the desert. I tried to speak up, but part of what makes me a good exorcist is my soft heart. I can speak firmly against ghosts, but against real people, I was still a little shy. Oh sure, I had been around plenty of people. But I not formed many close ties besides family. I mumbled, "The temple won't open because..." She started slapping me, "What was that? Speak up!" Finally, Nevras pulled her off me. She's crazy. How did she expect me to speak while I was being slapped? "The temple won't open because... I know where it is, but nobody has been able to enter. There's some sort of barrier. The words at the entrance mention something, but the only thing that is legible mentions this town. «Seikai» is what it reads." And then I pointed to some writings that I copied from the temple.

Upon entering Seikai, the first thing we noticed were stone pillars marking the entrance. There were some houses and an inn with some trees surrounding them, and at the edge of the forest was a misty outline. The houses were designed in a gazebo style, providing shade yet allowing air flow. This was obviously to adapt to desert weather, but oddly looked out of place here in this misty forest. The brick foundation protected against sand and wind, retracting shades screened out the hot sun, and runes were placed in any open spaces to be non-permeable to matter other than fresh air, behaving as screens. All of these buildings had a distinct lack of privacy. And all of them showed a picture of a town frozen in time when this was a desert town, where a forest had grown up or one with a pervasive mist.

I sighed. Seikai had a reputation among our townspeople. They said it was more haunted even than Goji. Something had gone horribly wrong. "Let's talk to the townspeople," Zoe suggested, "maybe we can figure out their troubles if we ask around."

I didn't do that. Instead I started casting any effect I could think of. "*Antimagic Zone!*" The area became saturated with a sort of viscous grey residue that screened out runes. Light and sound seemed muted, as did other natural and human magic. Unfortunately, nothing happened to the area itself. After roughly fifteen minutes of feeling very uncomfortable (magic was natural, so reality without it felt wrong), I dismissed my own effect. Let's try something else. "*Dispel!*" The effect brushed away any runes, but as I should have noticed before, this wasn't a result of runes. "*Uncurse!*" If this had been a straightforward curse, this might have worked, but it did nothing at all. "*Negation!*" This was among the top two disenchantment effects, it covered the area with a big zone of darkness which sucked away any runes and aura from there, as well as from permanent enchantments. The mist was unaffected. "*Break Enchantment!*" If anything was going to break this effect, this would do so, it was the top tier of disenchants. It could break even unravel effects that were not typically considered magic, such as a petrifaction from a creature's eye beams or enchanted items. Nothing.

Someone tapped my shoulder. "So are you ready to talk to people yet or are you gonna keep casting magic until you pass out?" Zoe asked me. I sulked, "I don't want to talk to anyone..." She closed her eyes as she smiled, "Suck it up!" I started mumbling and grumbling, until she gave me a light hug. "Relax," she said, "I'll be there with you. If anyone seems creepy, I'll do my best to help out." The others spoke up, led by Ambrosia, "Don't forget about us. We're there for ya." I suppose...

We started with the creepiest person of all. This guy must be the mayor. He was dressed almost like one of those counts in an old black and white horror film, cape and all. His slicked-back hair moved not at all in the misty air as he welcomed us, "Welcome to Seikai! Take the opportunity to talk to everyone in town, to get to know them first, then I'll speak to you." We took his advice. We talked to the little boy with brown hair first. He was scampering around trees and stuff saying, "Girls? Nah, I wanna climb trees first. Girls are really gross!" Apparently his name was Tommy and the girl with orange hair who had pigtails and a similar lack of interest in boys was named Rose. Next we talked to a man with disheveled black hair who appeared to be the town's shopkeeper. He greeted us, "We have the best prices around. Because you know, there isn't anything around." Once we bought some gear, he whispered in confidence, "The Mayor is keeping us here. We neither age nor die, but we can never leave. Get out while you can!" Nah, it was easy to leave, I could do it any time I wanted. Lastly I talked to the 'innkeeper', this was a lady who guarded the one gazebo that contained a bed. "Yea, I know, we're out in the open," she said, "but the bed is soft!" After sleeping, she also warned us, "You shouldn't be sleeping out here, it's not safe! You'll become part of this land!" These warnings would be more effective if they gave them *beforehand*.

We returned to the count/mayor to find him laughing hysterically. "So, you met everyone?" Ambrosia confronted him, "Yes, and we found out your little secret... you've been keeping the town trapped in here forever!" The man bellowed in laughter all the more, "Too bad, you might have done something before, but now you're a part of this town too! Enjoy your stay!" Nothing to do now but accept eternity within this town.

AMBROSIA

Oh, c'mon. We haven't given up *that* quickly. The mayor alternatively refused to respond to us and mocked us, from that point onward, so we devoted our efforts on talking to the rest of this small town. Wandering around, we noticed that after we slept apparently the little girl with pigtails was gone, and in her place was a grown woman whose orange hair had softened to a strawberry blond, and pigtails had given way to a long braid. This was strange enough that it was definitely a place to start. It seemed like Zoe and Azrael were having some kind of moment here, so I let them do most of the talking to these people.

"Over the years, I've grown to like Thomas, but he's still so childish," Rose explained. As we looked at little Tommy, I could understand why. He was still in the body of a child. Azrael asked, "You want us to help tell him how you feel?" She nodded. Azrael carefully explained what Rose said. She had to do this several times because the child was not very attentive, but she was patient, and repeated until finally the child understood. "Really?

But I'm just a kid. I can't accept those feelings," he said. I reassured him, "C'mon, give it time. When you get older, you might change your mind." It was like some freeze-frame trick in a film where they switched a character without even bothering with gradual transitions. Suddenly he stopped being a kid, and there was this guy in his place. He told us, "I guess you're right."

The man named Thomas told us of his desire to get her a gift. After searching under the innkeeper's bed, we had noticed was a hidden cache of money, so we borrowed some for various gifts. Azrael glared at us, but I reasoned we were only borrowing, and these people might be ghosts anyway. Stealing from ghosts is totally ethical! I bought roses for Rose, as they were her namesake. "Ah, thank you," she said as she held the gift like a treasured item, "I guess that means he does feel the same about me." I watched these two thank us as they faded away into spirits. After talking more with the innkeeper and the shopkeep, we realized they too had some sort of past. They never had acted on it, seeing this as unprofessional. He decided to play matchmaker again, so we tried buying other things. Something about this woman seemed like she wasn't the type to really care about flowers, so we searched around for a novelty item. I saw something in the shop along with the common potions (like the Phoenix Meat rumored to be so good it could raise the dead). It was something called a Frog Tonic. Unlike other medicines that were designed to be drunk, this was splashed externally on wounded people. The foul-smelling mixture was well suited to dosing multiple targets and would begin to act against any cuts or bruises, closing them and mending breaks. It was extremely disgusting to watch as it made a sort of gel that caused blood to change from water, salt, and protein to a substance that closed wounds and *immediately* started rebuilding everything. I couldn't imagine anyone liking this, but as we bought about six bottles for ourselves, she noticed one and called out, "My favorite medicine! Did he get that for me? Hold on, I've got something for you!" Reaching her hands inside her dress (and embarrassing all of us while she pulled out random objects from her clothing) she finally managed to grab a hold of a small object, appearing substantially thinner afterward. Giving us a wedding ring, she said, "Hand this to him, will you? Tell him my answer." Azrael said to him, "Here... this... ummmmmm, yea." After that eloquent display, his face brightened, "Really? She asked you to give this to me? Tell her I accept." Azrael spoke up, "He ummm, said yes." Those two townspeople turned into spirits. There weren't many people in this town, but we continued helping until none were left but the mayor.

He began to scream in agony, "**NO!!!** You solved all of their problems? It cannot be! They're free! Don't you see? You've ruined me! Now who will come to this doomed little village? Tourism is **ruined**!" Unlike the others, he did not fade away into a simple spirit. Instead, his body began to horribly deform, folding into space, crunching and turning inside itself until nothing remained of him but a spirit of a skeletal head floating in midair. We did not want to touch this thing. All of us got behind Azrael.

AZRAEL

I carry a sword and a bell with me at all times. These are not fashion accessories. They are weapons that mean the difference between life and death against all manner of creatures of the night.

The Exorcist Bell is a culmination of my training. An exorcist learns many magical runes as a result of having to dispense with different types of creatures. They learn how to make unique symbols as well. There are exorcists from all walks of life, but their group came about as a result of relearning the art of casting out demons and evil spirits. I probably know more about runes than Elias over there, who tells me that he has been studying for years. When an exorcist learns to focus their power, they eventually complete a ritual known as the Forging of Heart. An Exorcist extracts a portion of their soul (oh, don't worry, the soul regrows itself), and molds it into an artifact. So long as the exorcist lives, the Bell remains. Each Bell has a unique power chosen by the exorcist, some stop time, others grow plants, or nullify magical items or enchantments. If they want to be outright generic, many exorcists just had their bell do Exorcism. The advantage of the bell was that it used its own mystic power, and with something like Exorcism, it would do it more than they might actually use in a day. Stopping time, on the

other hand, was something that the Bell could probably ring only once a day, but that was still more mystic power than most exorcists could muster together. The Bells were not any more powerful than normal humans who made them, but they typically developed the ability to hold more mystic power than a human could in a single day. My Bell could never be used. It could destroy anything (living, undead, robots, Monsters, or even Elder Formless) that did not cover its ears. This included me, and no, earplugs would not work . If I used this Bell, I and everyone else would die. At least, within range, but having never used it, I had no idea what this range was, as it had never been allowed to ring.

My sword was a standard issue Exorcist Sword. There are many types. The most basic is what we call a blank sword. It is forged with the special metal that only our blacksmiths know about, which makes it not only strong and durable, but able to take thousands of runes without breaking. These were made from a variant of elven, so they were effective against certain creatures, but these couldn't touch incorporeal creatures like ghosts. Next was the bound sword. It had bandages around the sword with runes written in ink, meaning it was effectively a cushioned sword with no sharpness. Because the runes were not carved into the sword itself and instead written on the bandages, these swords lasted very long. Then there were seal swords which had some runes on the blade, followed by twice-blessed swords which destroyed both good and evil and slightly sturdier than seal swords, and finally the named swords. Named swords were extremely rare, they were sentient, they resisted decay with a high number of well-placed healing and protection runes, and they had unique abilities that varied from sword to sword. I had no real skill at inscribing runes on metal, so I wielded a bound sword. It was slow, it was blunt, but until I found a better sword, it would have to do.

The floating ghost head flew toward us, looking to possess someone. But the sword's written runes slammed against it, shattering the skull apart. The spirit was no more. As we watched, the houses turned to ruins, and the forest returned to nature. The town faded away, though contrary to our expectations, it did not become a desert. We were standing in a ruins where people used to live. It was morning, so we put up a tent to sleep.

CHAPTER 11

Chapter 11 is always bankruptcy. Surely you know that.

AMBROSIA

The next day, we were still in the forest near the desert. Since we had little water, we returned to Goji at nightfall, bought more supplies, and spent the morning at an inn. We had made enough money from wild creatures in the desert to have a somewhat sustainable income, so we didn't sweat the price. We made it to the doorstep of the temple the next night, and this time the entrance didn't seem to be forcing us back. Hearing about such a building and seeing it proved to be two different things. The building proved to be quite the impossibly shaped structure, a massive inverted step pyramid lying in the middle of a desert. Well, at least *this* pyramid didn't suck.

The stone entrance emptied out into a long corridor. The ceilings were low and the walls narrow, obviously as a precaution against larger creatures like ogres wrecking the place, but it was no problem for people of our size. The hallway branched to the left, but since we didn't want to get lost right away, we passed side path for now. This was our first mistake. Aqorm was our mapmaker, since her skills at drawing seemed to be at least as good as her natural talent for music, so she at least made a note of such a path on a piece of paper. We ended up in a large room with a hole in the right side of the room, which appeared to extend into the darkness. The was a metal plaque on the wall, which read, «To advance, there are times you must retreat. » Elias, predictably, understood this almost immediately. Zoe and Azrael offered to stay at the current location, anticipating that there may be a puzzle involved to this room, while the rest of us continued back. There surely wasn't any other reason they wanted to be alone.

At the crossroads, we continued into the left path, and found ourselves at another expansive room. This room had a lever to pull, a shopkeeper, and a set of old stairs leading to the basement. The shopkeeper was apparently selling lanterns. She told us,

“You might find this basement too dark. I recommend getting a lantern first.” I looked at her sad eyes and cheerful face. It was obvious that she had waited for much of her life, in a temple nobody could enter, hoping to sell something to adventurers who might never come. After the fiasco in Aiken Temple where all of us were fumbling in the dark, this seemed like a wise investment. I gave her the last 10 Gold out of my pocket. This was an old oil lantern, so we wouldn't be able to use it much outside the shrine unless we bought a bit more oil, but I fully intended to get a better one later. Aqorm decided to scout ahead in the basement, so she could look for changes made by pulling the lever.

She returned to report that nothing to her knowledge had changed, but she brought back some keys which she had found inside a chest. They were a gold key, a silver key, and an iron key. These were different sizes and complexities. The silver key was ornate, engraved with religious imagery. The gold key on the other hand was incredibly simple, it was valuable as it was pure gold with an alchemical process to harden it. I had heard somewhere that silver and gold represented the spiritual and material world, but none so readily as these. The iron key scared me to touch it, there was something deeply wrong about the way it felt. I suspected it was cursed or something, there was a sense of billions of runes crawling on its surface.

We returned to the northern passage only to find there *was* no northern passage. The way ahead had been blocked. Elias had only to examine it for a moment before he concluded, “the switch we pulled must have moved this wall. You two, you stay here, Aqorm and I will check things at our end.” Yeah, right. They just wanted to spend more time together. We did as we were told. Sure enough, the walls opened up, and we rejoined Azrael and Zoe. Azrael looked disappointed. She explained, “The pit below has a platform that shifts... it just moved back when the wall opened again.” Oh crap. A puzzle.

For the next few hours we tried different methods trying to walk back and forth to get the party together. Zoe created vines, but the walls squished them into shreds. Aqorm tried using her geomancy to create a stone pillar, but it jammed the mechanism for the pit, meaning either the pit was fatal or we would be trapped. To make matters worse, everyone had coupled up, making this puzzle a matter a splitting up lovers. Ultimately, Zoe and Azrael decided to head to where the lever was, Elias and Aqorm doubled back to where the pit was, and we also made it inside the room. Almost as an afterthought, Zoe appeared inside before it closed, leaving Azrael stranded with the switch.

AZRAEL

I sent Zoe on the other side before closing the wall. Before I did so, I advised to her, “I will use a dangerous spell. When the door closes, tell everyone to move to the corners of the room.” Zoe left me behind to do what I needed to do. I continued back to the room with the levers, and activated the mechanism. This mechanism appeared to be designed to separate groups. It slid the pit into place when the door was fully extended, but it didn't seem to matter that the door was intact, so long as it was fully extended, and the wall clicked together. With this in mind, blowing a hole through the wall shouldn't make too much of a difference.

Although with a hole in the wall, she could easily join me, there was a specific reason why I couldn't cast this in front of her. Despite us being joined together by past lives, there were just certain things I wasn't willing to share with her. This spell was a family secret, with specific runes that were likely to get cast by accident. It took years to be able to safely use this effect, to control it properly. As it was, anyone who got caught in the path of this effect would be disintegrated, but if mishandled, it was more like a bomb. I've known people who mishandled magic, it is the most frightening experience someone can watch. One minute, the person is breathing, able to sweat and bleed, to blink and blush and feel, and the next, they are *gone*. They are atoms, motes of light, and dust.

Safely behind a stone wall, I intoned the spell, “*Destruction*.” Runes began to form in a concentric sphere and I wove them in a pattern with my index finger. This part was very difficult. The natural inclination of these runes was in the opposite direction, causing a black destructive explosion. Causing it to move in this direction was like swimming upstream in a fierce river. I managed it only due to years of training. The runes began to stop rotating entirely, and then the runes gave way to the form of a greyish-black sphere.

The sphere expanded to a ball that was roughly the same diameter as the height of a person. The sphere made a hole with no explosive force exerted, no pressure, and no change in shape on the rest of the wall. It was closer to taking an eraser to the area than it was a standard offense spell. The ball diminished as it traveled through space, as the runes hidden inside the spell began to lose their power, until it finally dissipated into the air. I stepped into the room, rejoining the others. They didn't seem overly thrilled about jumping into a pit that may or may not be a fall to their doom, but Ambrosia's natural charisma won us over. We were apparently willing to do crazy things because we were cheering for her success. So it looks like I was jumping into a pit after all.

The wind rushed through my hair as I fell, and all around me faded to darkness. No, I didn't die. It's just because the sides of the pit was not well lit. I landed on solid ground. We were on a platform of some kind of metallic alloy. At the edge of the platform was a hinge which slid back as a result of the movement of a nearby bar, which could retract to have us continue falling down the pit. I was suddenly glad not to have broken the mechanism, yet nervous that it wouldn't be able to support our weight. But it held us, covering a patch of flooring that would otherwise be a fall to our doom. I looked around at the rock walls of what appeared to be some kind of underground cavern. It was dank and moldy here, but it appeared to be less so in a northern tunnel.

The northern tunnel quickly led to an area which had carved stone structures crudely superimposed over damp cave walls, and a stone staircase leading back to the surface. Torches were studded along the walls, so battle in here would not be restricted by lack of visibility. The problem was, just as it was more advanced than it appeared, the area was more guarded than a simply cave would be. A group of soldiers with shields and armor stood at ready, and behind them was a user of thaumaturgy, from the looks of it.

I got a closer look at them. Five valknuts and a necromancer. The necromancer was distinctive from its garb inlaid with bones and skulls, his tattered rags drenched in blood. The valknuts were covered with metal armor covering even their faces, but unlike the typical town guard, they were not chosen for their magical resistance. They didn't need it. On their sword and shield was a mark, the mark of the Valknut. It was supposed to symbolize the power to bind and unbind, the power of both binding oaths or pledges, and of breaking those of others. These warriors didn't need antimagic, for the power they had was able to cut spells in half, and they would not stop fighting since they swore never to abandon their duty. We had made an oath too, to follow Ambrosia to the ends of the Earth in order to help her succeed in her quest. I wondered at that moment, which of us would be able to keep their promise?

AMBROSIA

There were a few of these guys guarding the stairs. Some wizard or something that was wearing a bunch of bones, and three armored soldiers with a shield covered with a mark that looked like a bunch of triangles that kinda locked into each other or something.

The wizard started mumbling some strange words, and dropped some bags of the ground. The bags popped open, and a group of bones started assembling themselves. Azrael moved to use her Exorcism, but it looked like she was currently busy helping Nevras with these armored soldiers. Zoe had tried to blast them with magic, but they somehow smashed her spells apart with their sword and shield. She instead switched to bow and arrow, and was taking shots at the wizard, who so far was dodging out of the way. Elias was busy keeping everyone healed. Aqorm, having used her geomancy, fought the skeletons at close range.

Zoe managed to get a good shot off on the wizard guy with her arrows and shot him through the arm, but he didn't seem to bleed probably from some creepy magic. He then cut off his arm, removed the arrow, and sewed it back on. I kinda felt sick watching that. Aqorm was having trouble with the skeletons. True, she have knives made from a material that all sorts of creatures loathed, but unlike zombies, the fact that these things were all bone meant it was difficult to land a good hit. Any time she tried, that guy would wave his hands, and they would put themselves right back together. Uhhh, maybe she should attack him instead.

Meanwhile, Azrael and Nevras were having trouble with those soldier things.

“Valknuts,” Azrael called them. She explained to Nevras, “These things can break magic with their sword and shield, and they are fast enough to block direct attacks. You will need to attack from the side but...” Nevras, impatient to fight said, “Okay, I'm on it. I'll beat these things no problem, I promise.” Azrael with a sigh, hit her palm against her face, then finished her sentence, “...but above all avoid making oaths and promises, because these things can use them against you.” The eyes of the valknuts began to glow, as they announced in unison, “*An Oath was made!*” The same symbol on these guys' shields began to glow beneath Nevras's feet, and suddenly he was fixed in place. “By my oath, you shall not keep your vow,” said the nearest one, his sword and shield glowing as he spoke. He slashed hard at Nevras's shoulder, leaving him in great pain, which Elias was trying to heal at range. Azrael pushed the sword back with her paper-covered sword. She called out “*Break Enchantment!*” Suddenly, he was moving again, and jumped to the side of the warrior. As I knew from dealing with our own town guards, just whacking armor with a sword wouldn't do much good because it couldn't really cut through the metal, the sword could only target weak points or possibly cut areas where the stuff was strapped together. Stuff like the armpits, the elbow, the visor, the backside, the back of the thigh, the back of the knee, and the groin. To pierce metal requires something not only sharper, but probably also harder. Sometimes if the slats of the armor were loose, someone could slide the weapon in between sections of metal, but that was a big if. Nevras outpaced the armored knight block with his shield, and stabbed at its armpits. He got another one through the back of the knee, and the third in the space under his breastplate. These were shallow cuts, but the knights began shaking visibly. “You failed in your vow,” said Azrael, “you **know** what that means.” The symbol near the shield and sword of the knights lit up, and then the inside of their armor glowed. The knights collapsed in a heap, leaving nothing but empty armor behind.

While the others were busy, I decided to do my thing. I used the trigram of Alexander, flooding the room with an aura of light. If those guys were able to counter this magic, they were too busy to right now, as they were fighting Nevras and the others. The skeletons were purified to nothing. The bone wizard just tossed out more bags and animated those into skeletons. Urgh. I couldn't just keep firing consecutive holy energy. My trigrams didn't use mystic power, but my trigrams went dark when used, each used trigram gradually recharging after about five or ten minutes. It left me open to attack in the meantime. Elias, after healing Nevras on the shoulder with a ranged casting of Healing, was trying to summon up some holy attacks. Aqorm was also ready to pick up the slack. By the time Zoe finally shot the wizard dead, I was ready to use Alexander again. But Elias was quicker with his prayers. Seeing no more opposition, we just walked up the stairs to the next floor.

The stairs kinda led us to a big open room. At the north end of this room were another set of stairs leading to the basement. Yay, back down again. This area looked much more man-made with its cobblestone walls, and sharp turns. Plus, the floor was something other than dirt or sharp rock. I made my way to the left side, and found a number of treasure chests. Weird. Contrary to what people think when playing roleplaying games, a treasure chest is something rather odd to see. Chests in general are far more likely to contain bedding than gold and jewels, since typically if one has such things, they just put it in a bank and get the value turned into an amount on paper. People can steal the money, but the bank is still expected to cover the amount the customer is supposed to have. To have money all in the physical world was crazy. Some random person could just come and steal it. Or as it was written, “Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” Further, having such things, in the middle of an underground temple, sitting in what was effectively a hallway... whatever. God obviously wanted us to take this, and it was best not to argue about the extreme oddity of this situation. The left treasure had 1000 Gold, which I pocketed without the party's knowledge, “Nope, nothing in this one.” Nevras gave me a gentle yet rather firm lean on the shoulder, “Are you sure?” I blushed and shook my head, “I may have need of some pocket money.” He nodded, and said, “That's better. Be honest.” The one on the right had a Sun Dress. No, not a sun dress, a Sun Dress. Like the dress I had worn on the

mountain fighting that big bad wolf, it had elemental traits. Speaking of which, I called for the part to take a break. We needed to dress in gear that would protect us. Nevras was shy so right now, he wasn't about to wear the Peach Dress, but Zoe changed into the Sun Dress that resisted thunder and earth, and I put on my ice-resistant Lilac Dress. The last chest was a rune chest, nobody could open it but those with a decent amount of magic, or in some cases only certain types. After several tries, we found that only Azrael fit the bill. Inside was the prettiest sword I had ever seen. Its body was made of what looked to be solid silver. The blade was decorated with an elaborate etching of two naked people but for fig leaves, being sent out of a garden, with an angel with a looming figure and flame sword nearby. The pommel was finely shaped with etchings depicting a similar angel protecting travelers from harm, and in other parts healing the sick. It swam in runes, much more than my pathetic eyes with their lack of regular magic could see.

Azrael took this sword, leaving her old one in the chest. Before she claimed it, however, she set it down. She said, “I call upon the spirit of this sword, I entreat you come forth in a comely and acceptable form, so that I may speak with you.” The sword glowed for a second, and then converted to the form of a lovely man with wings. Yes, I'll describe this guy as lovely. Angels are androgynous and born as developed as they were going to get, and though they are usually male they are far more feminine in their appearance than human males are. This one had curly brown hair, a yellowish robe with brown trim, the wings, a bronze staff, and sandals. That Spanish painter Murillo got him dead on. “So,” said he, “you are aware that the Named Swords are more than enchanted weapons, then?” Azrael nodded, “I expected as much when I discovered there was an upward limit of available space for runes on an object that is not an artifact, but the amount of runes that can swim around a living being is virtually infinite. I thought I should ask permission before I use you.” The being shone with light, and once again transformed into a sword, “And you shall have me. I will be a sword of flames for you, protecting you on your travels.” Azrael strapped Raphael to her belt and walked along in silence within this underground area. Sooner or later, we came to a door blocking our path. To the left and right were levers. After talking to Raphael and finding that no, he refused to just burn the door down (something about undermining a living being's effort in creating the lock), we set about pulling the levers. Through trial and error, we discovered that the levers were linked to each other somehow. If one was pulled without the other, it would pull the other back. And so it was that we spent much of the afternoon trying to sync up so that a stupid door would open, since a sword had a will of its own, and despite being able to cut and an burn metal, decided not to.

Finding a staircase upward, we found ourselves in a room with a series of glowing areas on the floor. Nevras stepped on one and disappeared. Panicking, I stepped on the same area and appeared right behind him. It seemed these were some sort of teleportation pad. After the initial shock wore off, we dedicated our time to figuring out which pad led to what room. Elias marked each room with a number to make sure we didn't wind up going in circles. But as this was still confusing, he also put a mark near any portals we had tried already. After many tries, we finally narrowed it down to one portal. The next room we encountered was fairly small, and poorly decorated, but managed to have a save point, which we took full advantage of. We definitely were not going to do this over again, if we could help it. At long last, we had made it to the stairs of the second floor.

A bit to the side of the stairs, we noticed some keys laying around. One was encrusted with jewels, another was twisted into a strange shape, and the third was a skeleton key, made from the bones of what appeared to be a human corpse. Stifling the urge to vomit, I picked up the last along with the others. This path twisted and turned but ultimately led to another door. Near this one was a sign that read, «When you have nothing, everything is equally possible.» Yay, more riddles. Unlike the other, which was clearly triggered by a lever, this one had a definite key hole. Trying each of these in turn, we realized that we must have missed something, as none of these keys seemed to work. Then Aqorm grabbed the keys, and threw them all against the door. I was astonished, as now we were left with no keys. After trying to grab them back, and repeatedly being pushed back by her, I noticed something happen. The keys that were nearest each other started to blend together, the gold and silver, the twisted and skeleton, the iron and jeweled. Suddenly,

there was only one key left. It was very long, and very strange looking, but unlike those other keys, it was actually big enough to fit into the keyhole. I turned it, and we continued up to the third floor.

This area had a hall that started out heading north, then turned sharply south, and to the left, south again, and then split to the left and right. The left path headed north, the right path led to a locked door that had no identifiable way to open. Since the other path was impossible right now, we took the obvious one, which wound up emptying out into a room with five levers and a similarly locked door to the north. Since there were six of us and five levers, Elias agreed to help us figure this puzzle out systematically. He pulled out some scratch paper, and told us to think of each lever as a binary combination. Some of us (not me, certainly) didn't understand binary, so he explained that pulling to the right, or "on" was a 1, while "off" was a 0, and each number represented a place, so all on was 11111, all off was 00000, and the second and fifth levers on was 01001. Using this, he sequentially made it all the way through each lever combination, until at last, at 10011, the gate opened. There, in the room ahead of us, was one of those huge chests like we found at Phoenix Castle.

Carefully, I opened the chest, checking for traps. Not that I was any good at that, that was Aqorm's specialty. But I opened it from the side, so if arrows and stuff came out, they wouldn't hit me in the chest. Given what we knew of this dungeon, I wasn't taking chances. Inside, I saw a small red ring with a note attached. «Fire Ring» it said, «use this item to light small torches.» While I was pretty certain that we already had a magic sword that could set itself on fire, we needed this too. Especially, given the sass that sword gave us the last time we tried to burn something. I was at a loss, however, in terms of how to use it. I started saying magic words. "Alakazam! Presto Chango! Salvador Dali! Abracadabra!" Nothing. I tried poking the nearby torch, waving my hands in large circles, trying to punch people, everything I could think of. Finally, I asked Elias, "Come take a look at it. I dunno how this thing works."

CHAPTER 12

In which the group collectively defeats Four Gods, and ride a Prouncing Owl Cat.

ELIAS

It took exactly five minutes to determine the issue. Even if Ambrosia could use magic other than her Oracle powers, which given how strong they were, was unlikely - the Law of Conservation of Will stated that the amount of magical versatility that a person could have is inversely proportional to its base power - it was an absurd notion that any of those methods would actually activate any sort of magic.

A quick observation of the ring revealed its was made from alchemy, not magic. The metal of the ring was a fireproof alloy, with a tab that slid open a small slat exposing the stone inside to air. Inside was a pyrophoric stone. Pyrophoricity, for the layman, is the ability to ignite when exposed to air. I explained all of this (to the best of my ability) to Ambrosia, and taught her how to use it properly. As we could see no obvious means of unlocking the door to the south, I inspected the unlit torches within the corridor, and discovered that near the wick was a heat sensor. After instructing her to light them all, the door did indeed open. Taking the stairs inside, we found a pair of crystals near a circular dais. A nearby plaque read, «This room holds the key to the power of rings. Focus the prisms to the center...» The puzzle was obvious. "Ambrosia," I said, "place the ring in the insert in this platform." I pointed to a small circular indentation that was obviously suited for such a thing to be placed. She followed my order, and I began to solve the puzzle. These crystals had light reflecting from above in an irregular path, the key was to rotate the crystal so that it focused light in the center, like the riddle said. The tricky part was figuring out from the rather dim reflection when one was done with a side. Ultimately, I carried it out, and as the light shone on the platform, the ring fell into a hole. Ambrosia looked angry and frustrated, since a great deal of work was involved in the acquisition of such a device, but I heard something happening below our feet. Eventually, a ring popped out of the ground. This was a different ring. Could this be alchemic transmutation?

On further inspection, I think they just swapped out the ring for another one. This ring was quite different from the old one. A lens appeared to release or absorb thermal energy, using a portal to a dimension of fire. That is, it could not only create a small amount of warmth sufficient to spark flammable materials but also unlight them. But, a person might ask, isn't it unsafe? Not exactly, remember, temperature is not the same as thermal energy, especially if the hot object has low mass. It was actually safer than the flame from before, and this appeared to be also able to snuff flames.

Ascending upstairs, we noticed a pair of stairs hidden in a blind corner. We hadn't seen this before but this was obviously the right way. We ascended into yet another puzzle room. This one involved pushing boulders into place in order to depress pressure plates. Ambrosia used the gloves from earlier to move these rocks. After much effort on her part, we made it to the next room. I hoped desperately that we would find our path out of this place. The room in the next floor was completely circular with a Yin Yang pattern in the center. In the same curved pattern as the center, there were lit torches and unlit, but the pattern was completely backward, so we wound up having to unlight these lit torches and vice versa. There was a fair amount of trial and error, however, for we had to match the swirling pattern of the lights in the room. When we completed the pattern, a trap door opened, and a metallic staircase extended.

We arrived at a room with a number of geometric circles. I'm not sure I can help those reading this account properly visualize this; nevertheless, I shall try to explain it. The outermost section was arranged in one large circle, and inside these were seven hexagrams. Six of these surrounded the last to form a Star of David pattern. The center hex had four smaller ones that were arranged to cross at the central point of the central hexagram.

Each of these circles glowed as we stepped on them, and functioned as switches to activate the puzzle. The idea was that we stepped on circles in a certain order, which would in turn power the ritual to transport us to the core of this temple. But it would take research to solve it...

GOD

I shall clear up certain things before we proceed with our story. The threads of the story have become tangled, and it is my duty to ensure that you understand. The Law of Conservation of Will mentioned by Elias is something that our learned understand better than they can explain. This law means that the more unique and powerful an ability, the more “space” it takes up in the user's spirit. Ambrosia's Oracle powers are sufficiently unique and powerful that she is unable to learn anything in terms of magic, since they consume virtually all of it. In fact, unbeknownst to her, she lost her Trigram power entirely, unless I grant it back for an emergency. She is able to use some magical items, and she is able to learn passive abilities such as her dodging ability, but spells or techniques are out of the question. Elias, on the other hand, could possibly also learn alchemy or summoning, since his abilities are not terribly rare. If he learned summoning, however, the great power would swallow his ability to learn any more techniques.

Despite many people explaining abilities, I fear they may have created confusion or apparent contradictions. It seems as though there are many exceptions to what is considered magic, right? Alright, I shall try to explain from the top. “There are many gifts, but the same spirit.” I have given all living things a spirit, but it is what they do with it that makes them distinctive. The typical person has thaumaturgy, a talent which they can develop into great or small power based on their faith, and antimagic for lack of faith. Others, like Elias or Azrael or the wizard Yazim Jianne are able to learn powers through study. Likewise, users of alchemy require study to understand how different herbs and minerals function. There are also techniques, which are physical abilities not magic, and which require training and physical conditioning. And so on, including stuff like racial abilities.

All of these gifts were either divided into magic, antimagic, physical abilities, or other abilities. Other abilities were things like Ambrosia's Oracle Crest and her Trigram attack, they didn't fit into a clear category and were hard to counter. This would also include things like Exorcism. Magic was further subdivided into direct magic and indirect (such

as miracles) magic, and direct magic was still further subdivided into magic that used aura or magic that used runes. Indirect magic, physical abilities, or other abilities can still be blocked by some magic or dodged. Whew. I think I covered everything.

AMBROSIA

So I don't really understand the puzzle, we just followed directions. Elias told us to stand in the very center of all of this, while he walked around and triggered the circles. First, the outer boundary was lit up. Elias said this was to contain the magic. Next, he activated the outer circles in the sorta triangular pattern. This created a vaguely star-shaped boundary, which he said would focus energy and stabilize the effect. Finally, he lit up the circles that formed a cross, and then moved toward the center with us. The circle swirled all about with energy, and suddenly we were in another room of the dungeon. There were four animals here. In the northern section of the room was some kind of giant turtle, to our left was a white tiger, to our right a serpent dragon, and closest to us in the south entrance was a giant... red chicken. “These are the Four Gods,” Elias explained, “they protect the cardinal directions of North, South, East, and West. Genbu the turtle guards the North, Seiryuu the Dragon guards the East, Byakko the White Tiger guards the West, and Suzaku the Phoenix guards the South.” Phoenix, chicken, same difference.

A long and epic battle against these critters began. Fortunately, they didn't appear to like the idea of working together, so we were able to attack each of them in turn. Suzaku flew at us, wrapped in flames. Zoe and Azrael blasted it repeatedly with water and ice magic, until it at last collapsed. The dragon, Seiryuu came next. While those two guzzled our remaining potions, Nevras decided to fight, with the assistance of Aqorm and Elias. Elias used Bless, boosting his speed and defense and his physical power, and Aqorm used her geomancy to drop some rocks on it. It had been about a day since she had last used this, as we were stuck in this stupid dungeon for quite some time. She used the opportunity of it being pinned to steal some dragon scales from its body. The dragon roared and squirmed, slamming her with its tail. It managed to throw off the boulders, and breathed in deeply, prepping a breath attack that would finish her off.

It never got the chance. I blinked, and Nevras had managed the Dragon Roar attack, stabbing it right in an area where many of its scales were missing after Aqorm's theft, and it crumpled to the ground. We likewise defeated Genbu easily, thanks to Azrael's sword Raphael and numerous thunder attacks from Zoe. Elias called out, “*True Source!*” This was a difficult prayer to cast because the nature of magic was such that it tended to not be able to create more of itself, so this was more like a bubble of energy which drained mystic power from him to restore their mystic power and to draw more from the air. Needless to say, casting it on himself was impossible. Elias was reduced to simple healing, but they were still ready to go. On the other hand, we were far from done. Suzaku had arisen from the flames, and was like new. And we had yet to touch Byakko.

The white tiger, Byakko, was like a literal force of nature. All around him, bamboo trees sprung up. We tried to attack him with magic, yet he smoothly evaded attacks as though they weren't there. The same for ranged attacks, techniques, and so on. Something about these steps reminded me of the lessons about “going with the flow” that Lao Tzu had taught me when I learned my footwork. “Hang on, guys,” I said, “got this one.”

Meanwhile, Azrael and Zoe were having troubles subduing Suzaku. They had managed to put down the phoenix once already, and just a few minutes ago, Zoe tried again. Exorcism didn't seem to work, because this thing wasn't a Monster or undead, it was just immortal. “Caw caw!” the bird cried out, as it flew towards them. Our exorcist stretched her hands out and said an extended chant, “*You who would do harm and evil to others, turn away from your path, repent. For the day has come where if you do not turn from your path, God will destroy you. But if you turn away, God will forgive you.* ***Ninevah****!*” Azrael became sheathed in some sort of protective field. The bird, recognizing that this spell probably *would* kill it off for good, let out one last “Caw cawwww....” and sat down on the floor, pecking at the ground. Its size began to shrink, and before long we were looking at a pet-sized phoenix clucking at us. Zoe waved it over, and adopted Suzaku as her pet. “Don't eat all my food though,” Aqorm warned it. “Aqorm,” Elias sighed, “it's a Yuanchu phoenix. It lives off pure water and bamboo, and finds its own

food. It's not gonna take your meat."

The tiger and I were engaged in a strange sort of defensive dance. The tiger lunged forward and I swept my body aside. I tried to stab him with my knife, and he was always in another place. This continued for some time, with it trying vines to restrain my movement, earthquakes, or a deafening roar to throw me off. Somehow, I always knew exactly what to do next. And all of my moves against it, whether using my knife, fishing pole, Trigram, Oracles' Crests, or simply dodging seemed to be of no avail. The tiger would not even charge while Apollo's golden aura was active. I remembered something Apollo had whispered to me before we left. He told me, "If ever you find a creature who is a counter for this ability, show him this move, and he will no longer bother you." I circled around Byakko, and he around me. I moved my hands in a Ward Off position. We walked in a pattern that closely resembled a waggle dance from a bee, neither of us moving close enough to attack or be attacked, to advance or to run. We were mirroring each other for a minute or so, when the tiger nodded and walked away. A bamboo garden formed a path ahead of him, as he walked off fading into thin air. Nevras asked, "You got him to flee? What kind of magic was that?" I tried to think of how to explain that it wasn't magic at all, but I gave up. "Ummmm... that happened," I said.

All of us took a very big breath, and sighed in relief, but our relief was short-lived. A circle appeared in the center of the room, and a woman ascended, hand first, into the area. She was dressed in tattered clothing made from roots and leaves, and her dark brown bangs parted slightly to the left. She wore no weapons, but it seemed like she may be able to use runes. "Greetings," she spoke, "I am Kodama of the Center Gate. My existence is Void, I exist only when the Four Gods don't," Kodama told us that we would need to challenge her in order to receive her Crest, at which point all of us groaned. This dungeon was entirely too long compared with the others. "S'okay," she said, "I'll let you rest in your tent for a while." She showed us to a save point, and we took advantage of her kind offer, building our tent. Inside, we made a po'boy out of thinly-sliced pumpkin and alligator meat with our remaining bread. It was rather interesting, with the subtle squash flavor blending with the not nearly as subtle flavor of the alligator. It was chewy yet not rubbery, and both parts melded in a soft warm whole that was pleasant enough for being about to fight for our lives.

After the meal and a long rest, we talked to Kodama. She repeated, "Greetings. I am Kodama of the Center Gate. My existence is Void, I exist only when the Four Gods don't." And then we fought.

ELIAS

Before we proceed, I guess I'll talk about counterspells. Since, after all, that was half of what she did for the battle. I've told about how runes can be dispelled but aura stuff can't, but it doesn't really sink in because half of the time it sounds like we're just calling out words. It's not really the words that are important, the caster could speak in English or Hebrew or Unified Japanese, or any other of the languages of this land. But since most of the population know Common (the current version of English with some changes), this is how most spells looked. Of course, what the average person doesn't see is that while it is being spoken, runes start floating around in the air, and the prayer or spell starts when they combine. For a Fire spell, a bunch of symbols that look like 火 floating in the air combine, and out pops a flame. Basically, there's about 3 seconds of lag between when the spell is spoken and when the effect happens. Now there are some aura-based spells, and some spells that are called fast spells, but this slight period where runes start to gather is where a thaumaturgy is at its weakest. Counterspelling simply forces these runes apart before they combine. And no, counterspells aren't runes themselves, so you can't counter a counterspell. They're... it's difficult to explain. Let's just say that thaumaturgy is less old than one might think, and some things came before that.

But this isn't all. When a spell is traveling towards a target, it can still be countered by someone with good enough knowledge of elements. Like, if our nature-user Zoe were to cast a water spell, and someone else casts fire, they would puff each other out. But such casting can actually be dangerous. Certain spells conduct others, so it casting water if the other person uses electrical magic would cause a pretty terrible shock.

The third area where a spell could run into trouble is around the target. A shield can negate, or reduce, or even reflect spells. Even aura stuff is no good against this. Typically, this was our response to spells, since I had a few to work with.

Zoe tried to cast Fire, but Kodama was ready for her, calling out "*Dispel*!" as fast as she could. I watched as the runes just fell apart, and Zoe grew more frustrated. We huddled together, as Zoe cast her fifth or so elemental spell with no effect. "Sigh," she sighed, "I can't even hit her!" We waved her over for a quick conference. Nailing a couple of pegs into the ground and cutting her hand, Azrael put up a Kekkai, a protective distortion that forbade anything in or out. It bought us time, but Azrael looked tired. And no, a Kekkai itself was not able to be dispelled even if it did work like that, because it formed a break between our reality and a protective pocket dimension. All incoming effects would be unable to properly target the barrier until she removed it.

While Nevras took lookout for any chanting, I asked, "How much does everyone know about counterspells?" Azrael of course, answered, "I've written a few of them, why?" Ambrosia, on the other hand, said, "Ummm, I know that it breaks apart runes." I groaned. Everyone knew that.

I explained, "I think this is our best chance. Okay, look, Ambrosia, it's like this. Dispelling magic works as an instant effect. She can counter constant effects like illusions or blessings where the runes just hang around, or she can counter stuff about to be cast. But after casting, there is a window of a few seconds when we can cast. So here's what I want everyone to do..."

Whispering out a plan, we coordinated things carefully. Since Ambrosia didn't have much offensive magic if there weren't undead around, she used her fishing pole to distract Kodama, as every good villain is distracted by fishing poles.

Meanwhile, Zoe and Azrael took turns casting. I used Twilight, only to have it countered, Azrael cast a Slow spell immediately to open the timing window just a slight bit wider, and Zoe bound her with vines and covered her mouth. It seemed like she was wide open to attack now, but this was not to be the case. "*Diffihlll*!" she cried out, and some of the newer vines withdrew their growth. She no longer appeared to be slowed down either, and she looked pissed. She wriggled around enough to manage to speak normally. "Now you've done it, you little pricks," Kodama snarled, "I'd like to see how you deal with this. *Decaying Touch!*" The vines around her began to rapidly dry up and became brittle, until finally she snapped them apart.

She changed her tactics. Instead of countering our attacks, she applied a Protection sutra on herself. She had been blasted with Lightning and Fire, but she continued to fight. Nevras and Aqorm tried to help out, but Kodama used a powerful effect called Negate Physical, shortly after she got slashed in the face with a Speed Slash. They couldn't even damage her after that. She shot at us with each of the four elements, until I used my Rainbow Shield to greatly diminish their effects. We managed to keep healthy with its help, but it was a difficult battle. Since her elemental magic wasn't as effective, she stopped using the elements altogether.

Annoyed, Kodama used Void instead. Void was all elements, and yet none. It was the formlessness of the universe, where everything was created and everything broke down. All the same, I was amazed that she was able to hold a swirling mass of emptiness in her hand with a strong urge to suck everything in. "*Vortex*," she said. Void magic was unlike anything we had seen. It didn't really contain runes, it wasn't organized magic at all. It was magic at its rawest, most direct. Matter cannot be created from nothing. It has to have a creator, and it has to have a material. But Void as a material was utterly alien to everything we knew about the current universe. The closest analogy would be the sudden loneliness of heartbreak, or standing six feet away from everyone. This was less a presence than an absence, a force of concentrated separation. Zoe urged, "Everyone move to the edge of the room!" Azrael tried a few cancellation spells against the slow-moving vortex, but it kept plodding along as she directed it, closer to its target, sucking up runes as it went. Zoe used the Wind spell to try to push it back, but it ... it ummm, didn't work. It just sucked in the air. I remembered what Lao Tzu had said, so I gave it back as advice. "Zoe!" I said, "don't target that... stuff. Target **around** it!"

Zoe recast, this time putting a right English on the spell, swerving it around the left of

the space of the vortex. It started to swirl faster and faster, while the vortex itself became like the eye of the storm, stopping dead in its tracks and gradually the vortex began to move in the opposite direction. Before it made its way to her, she halted it with a few words, "*That which does not exist, cease to be*!" Immediately, it stopped not existing.

Kodama smiled, and then sat down, acknowledging her defeat. She told us, "You have fought well. You have earned her right to use my ability," she said as the Four Gods Crest lit on my hand. Ambrosia objected to this, "Wait, Kodama! Why was I not required to struggle for my Crest?" This time she chuckled, "I gather you have heard of natural selection, the survival of the fittest." She nodded, "Well, what of it?" She told us flatly, "It isn't true."

AMBROSIA

The shock may have shown in my face as I asked, "How can you say that? What proof have you of it?" Kodama countered, "What proof had 'scientists' that wasn't doctored? Tell me, what of the people you have seen? Never mind their cruelty, they have told themselves they needed to be strong." She continued, "But look at them, are they? The people who live can be fat, lazy, or stupid, and yet still they may survive in this land. But you can't get far competing with everyone. Without others to give things, to make things, the strong would simply starve." I think I heard her muttering something about John Galt under her breath. She went on to explain how survival of the fittest created regimes where the weak were put in camps to be exterminated. Eugenics. Nazi mentality. And the genetic purity movement of the early 30th century, which almost erased the human race. "You see, when all the 'best' traits are selected, and everyone agrees on them, the lack of variety means one disease can make everyone sick."

Kodama continued, "All things in nature are connected. The food chain is not a cycle of death, but one of life, for all living things need each other to carry out their lives. Likewise, as much as one might want to live a solitary life, it will fall to nothing, for the very reason that just as animals need food to live, humans need love in order to thrive. Life cannot be judged by quantity of objects gained, or how hard one works, but by worth, for when you die, all you have will be given, but those you know will grieve. I had to know that the Oracle had a team she could count on, that she didn't try to do everything herself." I frowned, "I hope the same is true of love. I wouldn't want Nevras judging my possessions as a scale of whether I'm girlfriend material. That wouldn't do." She nodded, "Remember... Life has a cycle of growth, age, death, and rebirth. The seasons change, plants grow or lose their leaves, and life and death constantly interchange. Don't just think in terms of nature either. Treasure love while it lasts. Don't take that man for granted. Remember, as a human you are part of the food chain, live life to its fullest."

I was uncertain whether I could live up to this standard, but I said nonetheless, "I will keep this lesson in my heart." Something about her explanation didn't add up, when considering how difficult and long the dungeon was. Not to mention my struggle in the past seemed... well such a struggle. Oh well. We had another Crest now! Yay!

ZOE

I had originally intended to keep my pet phoenix, but after finding it liked to perch on my shoulder, and seeing as how it was such an exotic pet that I had trouble keeping track of it, I followed Nevras's suggestion and sent it off with a letter to Phoenix Castle, stating «Please adopt this pet.» The last time I checked, one of the maids now has a phoenix to care for.

THE WORLD

Elsewhere, in the castle of Phoenix, King Charis and Queen Victoria walked home after a second Council meeting. The Council was worried about their organization, so they called an emergency meeting instead of waiting for their regular schedule. Still more troubling, the meeting, once called, only lasted long enough to announce that this meeting was delayed until a later time.

Charis appeared like he wanted more to just go back home and sleep with his wife than he wanted to talk. Their transport broke down just outside the castle, and they were reduced to continuing on foot in Phoenix's notoriously bad weather. Ultimately, he

sighed, and talked to his wife. Victoria spoke first, “What a depressing meeting. If this continues, the Council will fall, and we'll have war.” Charis sighed even deeper, and nodded, “I just wish I knew what to do,” he sighed even more, “I don't like to think about what Nevras will face when he comes to power. He'll be a kind king, but for matters of war...” Victoria held him close, “We raised him as we thought right. And I have faith in Ambrosia's ability to help.” The two waved off their guards, and indeed did sleep together that night. Nevras would have yet another sister when fall came again.

Far below Phoenix Castle, and to the east, the wizard known as Yazim Jianne burrowed using his powers and a set of mining tools. He had dug for hours, and was becoming exhausted. Just then, a molebear came to disrupt his progress. He started for a second, gazing on its huge hairy form, long claws, star-shaped nose, and dim eyes. Slowing his breathing, he realized that if he called out a spell, it would likely trample over him before the runes could ever properly set.

Kneeling down slowly, he wrote in the dirt with his finger. «**時間 相反** » , it said. Time rewound slowly, until at last it was hours earlier. The spell could reverse time, but of course the exhaustion of using this much magic was still retained. He exited the cave, and spent the rest of the night in his tent. His dousing had told him the key was in this area. He would return, and this time he would prepare his spells properly. In addition to Move Earth and Snow, which he had carefully studied for this job, he was going to need to prepare the dread destructive spell, Meteor.

GOD

In this world, human beings have the ability to alter their environment. We see it all the time, but before the New Earth, we believed the opposite. An oasis in the middle of a desert? People believed that folks found the oasis and built the town around it. This is nonsense. Any oasis would dry up if there were enough people drinking from it. What actually happened was that as people settled in an area, reality altered to fit their needs. There are people who are good at this, who have a passive ability of surviving in harsh climates even in space, those people tend to be explorers.

Just as the towns near Seikai and Goji managed to be much more pleasant than the land around them, a single person with a strong sense of self could override the natural state of the world around them. It was usually as a result of having an incredible amount of mystic power to burn, but not always. The most powerful ability of the Crest of the Four Gods wasn't its active ability, despite being able to govern the four elements. This ability was impressive, yes, but her passive ability allowed her to adjust to any climate. Needless to say, making it back to town from this area was extremely simple after this.

AMBROSIA

The town of Goji was its usual self, with ghosts floating around in the air, and the feel of the air heavy with auras. But we ignored this, and headed straight to the port. The samurai who normally issued us tickets was nowhere to be found. Instead, there was a ninja selling boarding passes. Rather than take our money, he gave us a ticket and said, “あなたの旅行が好きであることを願っています! 这将是一次难忘的经历 !” which I had Elias loosely translated to, “Enjoy your trip! This will be a memorable one!” After taking the ticket, we took all of our remaining money and stuffed it in the back. I also talked with the others about keeping watch while we slept. We were not about to get mugged or killed for a “free” ride.

The ninja was right. It was an interesting ride. And we didn't need to fear what I thought after all. Oh no, we had a *completely* different issue, which I never would have thought of. But I stand by what I say. Ninjas are no good.

Let's just say this ship was originally slated for a three-hour tour. The weather started getting rough, and the tiny ship was tossed. Although, what actually went down was we hit a nasty patch of fog, and well, rocks have a way of cropping up every now and then.

I'll say one thing, ships have definitely improved in the centuries since the Titanic sunk. Ships were designed to fragment into pieces and effectively wick moisture. If a ship hit something, it basically turned into a series of rafts instead of filling with water. We awoke on a scrap of wood that appeared to include the top stern of the ship and some outside stairs. Nearby us, some flotsam drifted along: everything from light cabinets to

shelves filled with medicine, to crates filled with supplies, to a painting titled *Prouncing Owl Cat* by missbooyaka. The extremely salty water made all of it float despite it being heavy enough otherwise to have sunk, but I wasn't convinced these things would last well in this weather. The painting, thankfully, had pretty sturdy backing, so we were able to hop on it, then jump to a floating table, followed by a barrel and a bucket, before landing on another raft of floating wreckage. This had been jerry-rigged together while we were unconscious (by other passengers, I assume), so the raft was hooked by a ladder to another one, which in turn was hooked by a series of beds to a block of wood with a cannon strapped to it. Near the bed was a corpse of someone, although the moisture and wind had already rotted the body beyond recognition. This was serious weather.

Searching the body, we found a set of keys. It was pretty easy to figure out that this was probably the captain. The raft had a lower floor, and since we were trapped here, we may as well see what was down there.

Down below, the lowest levels had formed a pool. They weren't flooding, thanks to a steadily working sump pump system, powered by runes, but they also were not draining fast enough to become dry. We floated on a nearby mattress across the pool, and found ourselves facing a large metal door. Remembering the keys from earlier, I fumbled through them until finally one clicked. I made my way upstairs again, and I saw the shore in the distance. There were floating objects we had to make our way to, however. Thankfully, before we set out, we managed to find a save circle. Tying a rope to my body that I found wrapped around a post, I went first. I jumped from chair to table to random other floating object, but I missed a jump and fell into the water. Despite the high salinity, there were currents, and I'm a lousy swimmer. I got sucked under and died.

CHAPTER 13

In which Ambrosia jumps the shark, and gets the meat sweats.

GOD

Reset.

AMBROSIA

I attempted again, but this time a table wobbled, I lurched forward, cracking my head the wrong way. I must have lost consciousness, because I had a brief dream before again dying.

GOD

Reset.

AMBROSIA

I took a running jump and overshot.

GOD

Reset.

AMBROSIA

I didn't jump far enough this time.

GOD

Sigh... ***Reset***.

AMBROSIA

I jumped fairly well until one of the objects that appeared to be something gray in the water turned out to be a shark. I kinda jumped into its mouth.

GOD

Did she just jump the shark? ***Reset***.

AMBROSIA

I was careful to jump correctly, and avoid any suspicious gray objects. With some effort, I arrived on the beach, and then I held the rope fast, while Aqorm made her way

across. One at a time, each of us made it to the other side, and held fast to the rope when we made it. Now at last, it was just Nevras and Elias left. Elias managed, but seemed frightened by something midway through his rescue. “What's wrong?” I asked. Elias's words filled me with panic, as he announced, “The rope... all this water and salt... it's fraying...”

GOD

I shall break this story to once again fill you with a sense of tension and suspense. I know you believe there are no consequences to Ambrosia's allies dying, but this is not the case. Yes, I can reset Ambrosia's story if events went wrong, but if she were to continue on and save her progress without one of the party members, they would be left forever where they stood. Resurrection of the dead is possible, but typically having a body to resurrect is preferable. In a case like this, while the body could be revived rather than resurrection, they might just have their lungs fill with fluids again. Worse yet, the Afterlife is strongly based on personal drives and belief sets. When people are surrounded by powerful emotions like guilt or trauma, such things can strongly affect their Afterlife. It was for this reason that I sent a Savior, so that those who lived would not see themselves as doomed.

This happens not nearly as often as in ages past, where miracles and thaumaturgy were not as commonplace, but it does happen among those that have little ability towards such things. Those who do drown tend to find themselves in an Afterlife strongly governed by the creatures of the deep. Unlike other portions of the Afterlife, it is difficult to reach them. It is not, you understand, a failing of mine, as it is clear from Romans 8, there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God; however, as long as people are convinced they are someplace too deep or miserable for me to touch them, it is that much harder for them to be rescued because of their own mental constructs. Stop making it so hard, dammit!

So you see, knowing what I do about Ambrosia, I was filled with angst at the thought of her loved one leaving her forever. Yet I was powerless to do anything in this situation, as nervous and filled with doubt Ambrosia was... At least, this is a common belief. I am always capable of sending a soul to Afterlife anywhere, or even rescuing a body from the sea. But you humans prefer to believe that weird fish have some bearing on what happens after death. I wouldn't want you believing otherwise, so let's go with that. We'll say that people who die underwater attract the attention of Elder Formless. It's not true, but you humans will believe it even if I say otherwise. So, why not, let's start an urban legend!

I have not stalled long enough to build the prerequisite amount of suspense. I apologize. I shall tell you of the Blessed. Not all humans do have the ability of thaumaturgy. Some have other forms of power, such as physical techniques or alchemy. Some have antimagic due to lack of faith, and some have racial abilities. There's also the Blessed, those who lived by the Golden Rule. You know, “do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” They were so named, because they were blessed by their decision not to cause any sort of harm to anything. They ate nothing that killed anything, and did not engage in rape or murder, or even say unkind words. Like most humans, they could not be raped, but they also could not be hurt, drowned, poisoned, or even die of the elements. In fact, they could not even have unkind words said to them. If someone tried to call them “ugly” for instance, the words would stick in their throat. And a library worker that was Blessed would be unable to be fired from their job, threatened, or even made to do a task that was scary. They were easy to identify, since they were marked with a distinctive symbol on their forehead. It was my symbol, the symbol of the Way.

What protected them? An invisible barrier known as the Merkaba. This looked like a three-dimensional Star of David, and would ward off all misfortune. They still had to eat, sleep, and breathe, but they seldom found themselves in a situation where this was an issue. This is not to say they couldn't be touched in ways that they liked. The Merkaba was a constant and passive barrier against unwanted events. The Blessed had another name. Since an inordinate number of them occupied positions such as merchant or banker, they were called the Neutral Protected Class (or NPCs). NPCs could work at a bank, and have an attempted robber fire round after round at them after they refused to

empty the vaults, never looking up from their paperwork.

Nor was it easy to hurt their loved ones. The Merkaba was active at all times unless they were bored or had fear, and since it was impossible to feel fear if they never had anything unwanted happen to them, the first thing people tried to do was make them worry for their loved ones. But it was their love that protected, and their love of others made sure those people would never be hurt, as long as they loved them.

These people were sadly never adventurers since complete nonviolence was usually not compatible with a system that paid people to hunt or fish, or at the very least, steal treasure. It was a shame though, because if Nevras drowned here, he had no such protection. So, based on what I said, obviously he's doomed.

NEVRAS

Contrary to the naysayers, I am not the type of terrible swimmer that immediately drowns on hitting the water. I am fairly athletic, after all, and I am aware enough to spot some danger in time. I too noticed that the rope was fraying, so I quickly yet carefully used the rope to climb each floating object to the next one, until at last the fraying rope broke. With a free hand, I caught the other end, lunging for it. I missed some of the furniture, falling instead into the water. I was able to kick with my feet, but because I was not able to let go of the rope, I was unable to swim properly, and was slowly sinking. To combat this, I began to grab one hand to the rope while the other pulled the next piece of rope, placing hand over hand as I dragged myself towards the shore. I was not alone in my endeavor, and eventually Ambrosia and the rest dragged me until I was on dry land.

From the beach, we noticed a town off to the distance. Unfortunately, as we got closer, there appeared to be an Impossibiru Robo up ahead, so we were careful to hide in bushes and sneak around it. In previous ages, robots were often crude to the point where Aqorm could probably steal their nuts and bolts, taking them apart before it hurt us. Even the flying mechs were no match against this approach. However, this wasn't as fragile. This was commonly used to guard places one wasn't supposed to go to yet, for it did not even any sort of seams or obvious vulnerabilities. Somehow, we got through, although someone may have stepped on a twig causing it to blast a beam of plasma at the tree nearby us. We were clearly supposed to go some other way, but I didn't care. After a long hike we managed to reach the town of Gruumi.

The town was, quite literally a one-horse town. And I don't mean like “I literally was so drunk that I died.” There was one horse, and the town was just a inn/pub and a harbor. And as to the port, something about the boat getting wrecked in the middle of the ocean, was probably what was causing an extreme delay. Since we were stuck in this beach town for what might be a *long* time, and since we had a bit of an intense time of it lately, I decided Ambrosia and I could use a date.

We walked into the pub, and it was definitely in need of work. If the film *Deliverance* was set in a restaurant, one would get roughly the idea of the place. There were lowlifes of all sorts, some of which looked severely inbred, and others who looked like they were rejects from some hole in the ground. That place was too good for them, so they came up here. At the bar itself, there were *things* dressed in hoods and rags, I decided not to talk to these. In the table nearest the door there was an elf woman with a long white dress and blond hair, who was sitting next to an R-model robot. His main body was like a giant metallic egg, with backpack to run his systems, legs which ended in an iron boot rather than toes, and his hands ended in three fingers without any knuckles. The woman looked at him with fascination. The table to the north side had a party already dining, a man in heavy iron armor with what appeared to be a boy and a girl servant. We sat down on the open table. There were stairs nearby leading to the beds, but... we weren't going to stay.

Stepping around outright holes in the floor, the waitress wandered over to our table. As I looked up, I was struck by how incredibly... morose she looked. Of course, Ambrosia had been talking to me for a while, so I didn't mention anything. “It's been a while since we just hung out. We've been doing too much work lately,” she said. I nodded, trying hard not to stare at the waitress, “Yeah...Fighting critters is no picnic, and we've really been on the road for too long.” Ambrosia added, “You know, if this could be called a second date, most people would say it's lame.” I sighed, “Yeah, we need to do

something." Ambrosia ranted a bit here, "Just so you know, I don't blame you. I blame this crummy town, with nothing here but this pub, and a bunch of small town yokels." The waitress coughed. I asked, "Maybe the locals know something we don't?"

Tired of being talked around, the waitress finally spoke up, "Can I help you?" She said this with the slightest hint of annoyance in her voice. Maybe she didn't like her town getting trashed like this. Ambrosia, finally looking at her, said what I'd been trying to avoid saying, "Nevras, she seems almost sad enough to kill herself. In front of us!"

After regaining her composure, she said, "Could you tell us what there is fun to do in this town? We were on a date, but having nothing to do is kind of... thwarting it." I noticed her mumbling to herself, like she was personally regretting something. Finally, she explained, "Hi, my name is Umi, I'll be your acting tour guide. This town has a grand piano for musicians..." She said, pointing to the old clunker off to the side. Ambrosia shook her head, "I don't play." She continued, "We have drinking contests every now and then..." Ambrosia and I were practically nondrinkers, and told her as much. She frowned, but tried to maintain a cheery attitude, "The only other thing is our Old 96er." Ambrosia looked intrigued, "Old 96er? What's that?" She beamed with pride as she described, "The Old 96er is our specialty 96oz prime rib, grilled to perfection, not that it helps much considering the obscene size of the meat, and served with haricots verts, grilled mushrooms, and mashed potatoes & gravy. If you manage to finish the entire meal in under thirty minutes, it's all free. Plus you get a prize." Ambrosia became excited, "Oh? What kind of prize?" She explained, "A tee-shirt that says, '**I FINISHED AN OBSCENELY BIG AMOUNT OF MEAT, AND I DIDN'T THROW UP, CHEAT, OR TAKE IT HOME FOR LATER**.'" Ambrosia looked even more interested, "I need that shirt." I asked, "Can we split it?" She nodded, "Yes, but if either of you throw up, you both lose the challenge."

And so it was that we undertook the legendary challenge. The steak, predictably was disgusting. Oh, don't get me wrong. It was medium rare, it was soft, it was nicely marbled, and it was tender. But imagine having an awesome steak and having to chew like crazy to finish it in a limited time frame. The green beans had just the right amount of seasonings. The mushrooms had a delicate earthy flavor, and the potatoes had a bit of garlic added for an extra kick. But after about 30 oz each, I felt the muscles in my mouth seize up. Wagering that one or both of us would either choke to death or throw up, I slammed my hand down in the universal symbol for tapping out. We continued to eat it, because it was rather good, yet did so over the next two hours. Meanwhile, I noticed that the waitress Umi, in addition to looking nauseous, was still very sad. Ambrosia asked first, while still gnawing on a huge piece of meat, "Wait, before you go... Not that it's any of my business, but why do you look so depressed? Is it that this town is a dead end?"

Umi sighed, "You're right, it isn't your business," she paused, "But I'll tell you anyway. A couple years back, I actually owned this pub. And I had a boyfriend that I thought I was going to get married to. Instead, he left me for the waitress. Then, he bought out the company's stock and put me out of management. Now I work as his waitress. Can you imagine someone like me, bright future, plenty of education, getting the shaft because some big jock simply bought their business? I don't even get to work my own hours!" She sighed again, "But that's not really the issue, because I've saved up to almost buy the place back. The real problem is every day, I see couples like you making it work and I wonder what a beautiful and smart woman like me is doing wrong."

Ambrosia tried to cheer her up, "Don't worry, we're not nearly as close as you think. This is our second date. You just need to get your confidence back. Why, I bet you the next person to walk through the door will ask you out." Sure enough, no sooner had she said this, than a short young woman with red hair in a ponytail came in, and said to her, "Can I get a table? And your number?" I snickered, until I realized she was serious. Umi said, "I'm sorry, but I'm not really into..." she stopped as she saw Ambrosia's glare. "I mean... I'm willing to consider it if you're serious." She nodded, and they walked off to have their own date.

We ate in silence, systematically cutting the steak into smaller slices, and chewing slowly to not have a repeat of before. Then we split the vegetables, followed by the potato. Finally, I burped, and the room echoed with the raw awesomeness of what we had just done. "Ohhhh, my stomach," said Ambrosia, "Nevras, are you okay?" I nodded, "I'm

fine, except for what I'm fighting to keep down. Did you have fun tonight?" She shrugged, "Despite everything, I think I did!" I leaned over as though to kiss her, but all of a sudden, she said, "Wait a moment, please." She seemed to have a compulsion to search her purse for the room key. Although it was sweet that she wanted to take me to her room, I was sitting there waiting around while she can't find her keys. She dove into her bag and pulled out lipstick, bubble gum, nail files, school books, glasses, magazines, eyebrow pencils, perfume, and even strange stuff like watermelons. I was tempted to wonder how her bag held so much (but then I remembered, we have magic) and why a penniless girl from the street would suddenly have so much stuff, but that was probably a moot point. The moment passed.

AMBROSIA

Fighting a terrible food hangover, and the meat sweats, we held each other's hands while we talked to random people inside the bar. I really did care for our time together, it was just with all that had gone on lately, I was kind of stressed. Ah well.

We talked to the man in the iron armor. He introduced himself as the "daimyo" of Gruumi village. Since we couldn't continue on our journey by boat, and didn't want to hang around this godforsaken (in this day and age, this is saying something) town, I asked him about possibly finding a pass through the huge mountain range to the east. "Well, my great power and wealth can afford me many luxuries," he said. "I can have my vassals find an All-Terrain Vehicle for you to ride straight over those mountains. But I need a favor..." I knew it. There's always a catch. "Yes?" He explained, "Since ancient times, my people have used the power of Death as a source of energy. This power was contained in a stone called the Necrocite. You understand of course that I will be unable to help you until my legitimacy is restored? You must gain hold of the Necrocite if you wish to cross the mountains!" This indeed did make some sense. Nevras and I agreed, and were about to head out to tell the others the great news. We had told them to wait outside, so we could enjoy our date, ignoring the fact that they were probably hungry and thirsty, and also tired from their journey. Before we could get them, one of the vassals slipped out the front door and went outside. We followed after her.

The girl was a brunette, slightly taller than normal. Nevras had a hunch about her. "Look at her hands, her neck, and her shoulders," he said. I must have looked puzzled, "What about them?" Nevras responded, "Oh, nothing." I addressed her, waving, "Hey there! Can you help me find this Necrocite? I didn't know where to start. I would hope that you, as one of his vassals, had a lead." Her voice was soft, high, and lyrical as she said the words, "*I can't imagine what you are speaking of. I am but a simple lady in service of the great daimyo of Gruumi*," she said. "*What reason would I have for hiding the Necrocite on my person?* Phew, this is so exhausting..." For a second, there I heard her mutter in an uncharacteristically deep voice, but it was probably just my imagination. After a few seconds, I realized something. "Wait," I said, "we never said anything about you hiding it on you, just that maybe you'd know something about it. What's going on here?" In her soft feminine voice, she led us outside and told us, "*Would you two turn around, please? I need to show you something, and I will tell you when to look.*" Nevras, in dawning understanding grabbed me, and turned me around. I kept wanting to look back, but he held me close. I heard zipping behind me, and finally I heard a deeper voice telling me, "Okay, you can turn around now." If not for the dress and brunette wig on the ground, I would have thought she left and this boy just walked by. But yeah, same face and everything. He was dressed in shorts and a shirt. "Do you see now? He forces me to dress like a woman purely for his entertainment. We aren't his servants, more like his slaves! I had no choice in the matter, since I was his vassal." I said, "Wow, that's harsh! What do you want me to do about it, though?" To which he responded, "You must overthrow him!" He tossed me the Necrocite.

I went back inside. I had quickly planned what to do. First, I showed him the Necrocite. Then, I asked him for the All-Terrain Vehicle. "Take this," said the daimyo. I looked at the object he had given me. It was a cow bell, solid metal, and circular in shape.

It was a few times larger than the ones I had seen back home, but other than that, yeah, I was pretty sure this wasn't any All-Terrain Vehicle. I screamed, “You cheated us!” I may have lunged at him at some point. He managed to throw me off, and summoned four guards, seemingly from nowhere to take care of us. Using my knife, I wounded one enough that he wouldn't harm us, and Nevras and Azrael managed to knock the other two out. Aqorm and Zoe worked together on the last. “You're surrounded,” I said, “give up the Vehicle!” The daimyo countered, “That **is** the All-Terrain Vehicle. You just ring that bell, and the Sacred Beast will come to your aid.” A likely story.

After fighting him at length, he explained to us, “You have yet to see my true form!” So saying, his body shook as though he was having a seizure or something, and began to glow. He tore off his heavy armor to reveal... the innkeeper's daughter? “This is not even my strongest form. You have yet to defeat me!” He (she?) was right. We weren't going to defeat the innkeeper's daughter, not in full view of the innkeeper.

Thankfully, we didn't have to. While the daimyo had been distracted, the vassal from outside stabbed the daimyo in the back, “Now I am the new daimyo.” Perhaps we had made a mistake in trying to overthrow the leader, for shortly after that, we kinda were run out of town.

Wandering around the area, there didn't seem to be many places to go. There was a long beach all the way around the west coast. To the northeast of town, there was another building, but it was just a castle owned by some guy who wanted to sell us stuff. We bought provisions and rested, but the surrounding area was a jungle filled with extremely feminine-looking man-eating plants called tipitiwitchets (luckily I'm a woman), magus vines (supposedly it could use magic), and tigers/snakes. Yes, I know it seems like we have awesome powers and stuff, but when those are used up, all it takes is one snake bite to put the group into a life-or-death situation. And there was heavy rain in this area. I didn't want those healing us to have failing magic during all of this. Back to the east of town, there was a large mountain that appeared to be difficult to climb. So I took out the cow bell. I was not at all confident in its abilities, but I decided to try it out.

It made a typical low-pitched jingling sound, and I heard “Mooooooooo” echo across the land. The ground shook and out popped something that would definitely help us with travel over all types of land. The Sacred Beast... was a cow. Well, sort of. It was a red heifer and roughly the size of the one from the story of Paul Bunyan. I suddenly understood why 98 ounce steaks were so common here, and why such a large area of land was sand instead of grass.

With difficulty, we climbed the enormous animal, and rode across the mountains. It was a bumpy ride, but the large heifer kept a steady speed. At last we made it to a safe area, and dismounted on the grass. The cow faded away, to return to our aid when needed. There was one large beast nearby, but I used my latest Crest, the Four Gods, carefully walking through the steps of Carrying Tiger Over Mountain to generate a strong wind and other natural events. The animal, what appeared to be a mutant three-headed zebra, fell quickly to the multi-elemental attack.

To our direct east, we saw the shrine. To our southeast, Elias's former place, the Great Library stood. We decided not to go there right now. To the southwest, we saw a strange town that appeared to be built in a sort of reverse oasis. By that I mean, the area around the town was moist and snowy, which the town itself was a hot desert, and outside of that was the grassy area where we currently stood. It seemed like this town was attracting strange weather, so we of course had to check it out. Moving closer, I realized that I knew this town. Galaxia.

CHAPTER 14

In which some light reading is done, and protesters protect endangered worms.

NEVRAS

Mother and I traveled here once in our journey of exploration of the major areas of the New Earth, and because it was important for me to learn about actual climate change, versus the crap they called climate change. Galaxia's weather changed more than that of

coastal Virginia. Ambrosia, believing I had never been here ,started acting like I tour guide. “Over here,” she said, pointing east, “is our inn and pub.” She continued, pointing to the west, “And over here, we have our general supply store. To the northeast is our weapon shop.” I looked around the town as she was speaking. It had been awhile, but the town had not changed at all. The town was covered in sand, with snowfields on most edges. There was a dock, but I didn't trust it to get to whatever was our next destination, so we'd probably have to figure out something. The weather was currently doing a wintry-summery-mix due to the clash of desert and tundra weather. The buildings were made of some sort of industrial material I couldn't pronounce, that was designed to basically ward off the weather and temperature, even when it shifted dramatically. “Over to the upper left is our armor shop. And here is...” She stopped. She tried to finish. Instead she collapsed into uncontrollable tears. She asked, “They aren't coming back, are they?” I had no idea what she was talking about. “I have no idea what you're talking about,” I said. She explained that this was her adopted parent's place, and she had been there when they died. We decided not to visit this house while we were in town. Instead, we took in some more sights.

Wandering about the streets, we met some Doomsayers. As everyone knows, Doomsayers, much like Seers, have the ability to see the future, but they could only see negative images. Everyone usually ignored them. This group of Doomsayers cried out, “Repent! For your doom is at hand! The Council will fall, war will begin, the State will return, and the Oracle will die. And then all will end.” At the last bit, they got my attention. “Excuse me?” I asked. The glared at me, “Ah, the Oracle. You are a loathsome sinner, and you shall never amount to anything. And God will punish all who...” Elias wasn't known to fits of anger, but he had heard enough. He interrupted, “Get out of here! ***Now***!” He looked at my downcast face and saw the hurt. He said, “Plenty of people will be hard on you. But you must remember, there are parts of what they said that are true...” I glared at him, as did everyone else. How *dare* Elias agree with my accusers?!? But he continued, “But those Doomsayers can only see the negative. You are the *whole* of you, not just your flaws. God loves us because he can see our entire worth. And as for this business of God as someone who punishes people... Most people punish themselves enough, so why should they expect this of God?” I felt better, but I still had questions. “Wait,” I said, “what do you mean by punishing themselves?” He explained, “Remember being so defensive earlier? You'd already *decided* I was judging you. It's like that.”

After seeing enough strange people outside, we needed a break. We went inside to the inn to relax. The inn had some guest musicians, from the looks of it, a policeman, a chief, and a construction worker. They said they were the descendants of the group named... the Villagers? We visited the armor store next. The owner wore a mask covering his eyes, and had a cape and... we headed to the weapon shop instead.

The weapon shop was at least normal, but apparently it was a popular store. There was a line extending from the checkout counter all the way to the entrance. Ambrosia and I managed to push ourselves past the line, and scouted up ahead at the front. The guy at the front of the line had basically appeared to be frozen in place. I poked him. “Hey,” he said, “I'm still deciding, wait your turn!” This store had very good weapons, but all of them were behind the counter. Realizing that I would get nowhere waiting in this line, Ambrosia and I decided we needed to switch places with someone. We talked instead to the second person in line. This perky girl with pink hair heard our request, and nodded, “I've heard girls can't fight or they're weak, but I can wield a giant greatsword with the best of them. So they're wrong!!!” Ambrosia agreed, “Guys are such jerks, aren't they Nevras?” Was she trying to get a rise out of me? “Leave me out of this,” I said. The pink-haired girl continued, “I was gonna buy a big broadsword, but this line is taking forever. My name is Hoshi, by the way. Tell you what, I'll move from this line if you can defeat me. And if you get me the sword I want, I'll get you something good.”

The battle was tough. I used my Speed Slash, but she managed to block all the individual strikes with what appeared to be a large metal pizza spatula. She sidestepped or blocked many of my other fancy techniques. I decided to switch away from the fancy stuff and go back to my fundamentals. When she swung her metal spatula around, I

blocked. I looked for openings, slashed, dodged, and countered. It was tough, but eventually I caught her off balance. I knocked the weapon out of her hand, and knocked her on her back with the flat of my sword. She surrendered, moving aside. True to my word, I went ahead and bought her a greatsword. Her face filled with joy, “You're so wonderful! Here, you can have this instead, I don't need it.” She tossed me a Golden Bow in exchange. The Golden Bow was a crossbow that had achieved legendary status for the ability of its arrows to pierce even the toughest of armor. Crossbows are tricky though. They are pretty difficult to put together in the first place, to string, and to load. Even just assembling a crossbow requires that you attach a bow into the main section then hold it down while you pull a bow often made of hard metal back and try to pull up. In other words, with your feet you are pressing it down to hold in place, with your hands you are pulling upward, and somehow you need either incredible dexterity or an extra pair of hands, and you need incredible strength just to string the blasted thing. Thankfully, the bow was pre-assembled, but all the same, I couldn't pull it. I gave it to Aqorm. She wasn't really into bows, but she could probably make use of this. I had no desire to open Ambrosia's emotional wounds, and we had done enough shopping. We left town.

AMBROSIA

We started in the direction of the shrine. As we headed towards there, a giant metallic disc flew by, way up in the middle of the air. The outermost and center-most rim was like the spokes of a wheel, and these two were moving constantly as the large object zoomed past. I blurted out, “What's that weird thing off in the distance? It looks like a Flying Platter.” Nevras responded, “No, no, it's a Flying Salver! See, it's made of metal.” Elias offered, “Could it be a Flying Saucer?” All of us shook our heads, “Nah...” It was obviously too big to be a saucer. I guess he really doesn't know everything. In any case, while we debated the proper word, the large disc zapped us with a beam. I blinked and it was night. Where had the time gone? And why did I have a sudden pain in lower parts? And why did I keep seeing weird grey men whenever I closed my eyes?

We met with no serious resistance from any creatures, and made it to the shrine before the sun rose. The Negi Temple was ornate, with two spires on either side, arched windows, and all sorts of architectural features that I really don't know the name for. On either side stood a statue roughly as tall as the building. The inside of the building was just as well decorated, with carved bookcases and large paintings of historical events. In the center of the temple stood and old... middle aged... young... infant, look the guy kept constantly aging and de-aging, okay?

ELIAS

“I am the Oracle Chronos,” he said, “my domain is over time and space, but I would talk to you about something else altogether. Ambrosia, have you ever experienced *deja vu*?” Ambrosia nodded, “Yeah. Why?” The chronologically-unstable man exposited, “The relationship between dreams and time, is nearly as interesting as the one between dreams and reality. People sometimes have dreams of that which is to come, called foretelling dreams.” He asked, “How often did you say you had this *deja vu*?” She answered, “Regularly.” He looked concerned, “Uh oh, this doesn't bode well.” She looked confused, “I don't understand, you just said *deja vu* was good to have! What's wrong?” The man explained, “As I say, dreams are related to time and especially reality. If your dreams are distorted to the point where you are constantly seeing the future, there is something wrong with your sense of reality. If you have *deja vu* regularly, it raises questions about whether you are real.” Ambrosia showed at least some knowledge of existential theory here, “Wait a minute! If I can't be sure of what's real, then... This is your experience, too. You could prove it to me! You could tell me something that I have no way of knowing to prove it's real.” The man shook his head, “Would there be any way for you to know that I'm not a dream image come to deceive you?” Ah, the Evil Genius theory. Ambrosia looked concerned. “I can't really prove it...” she said, “but that can't be right!” It was clear that this Oracle did not care for an outright battle, the point was to stress her out and get under her skin. And it appeared to be working. Ambrosia mumbled, “Think, Ambrosia! At any point do I have anything that can prove either way?”

AMBROSIA

I was always suffering on the streets. That seems real enough. But the whole mission from God seems like it would be too implausible outside of a dream. Everything from about Delphi onward also seemed too weird to believe. Why did I need Crest tattoos on my body? And why did I need to roam the countryside, talking to nutcases about stuff I'd normally never think of? On the other hand, some of the stuff I've heard is too strange for me to have dreamed it up on my own, that's for sure!

Among the strangest events I witnessed was on the Tsukuyomi Mountain, where that cat showed up and jumped into sheer air like there were platforms there. It's hard to imagine that something like that would happen. But thousands of years ago, people couldn't believe in magic or faith healing. Now, they're commonplace. So stranger things could happen, I suppose?

Two weeks before I went on my journey with Nevras and the others, one night, I was attacked by a pack of rats. I was gravely wounded, and lost a lot of blood. But when I woke up the next day, I was fine. I gasped. Oh no, could it be...? Is this all just a dream? Am I, in fact dead? There's no other explanation that makes any sense. I'll accept it.

GOD

When Ambrosia started believing in her own death, her body could no longer support her. It happened more gradually that her body spontaneously giving out and her collapsing in a heap, but this is usually the way with humans. Losing faith in yourself isn't an instant death affair, not unless you just stop breathing or eating. They stop believing in themselves, then they start failing. Chronos didn't accept her analysis of the situation. She failed to get the Crest. She couldn't continue her journey. And so on. Eventually, she settled by stages into a pattern of boredom and lethargy, until at last she died. I sighed. As deaths go, this is the one I least like to see happen in humans. Even staying home and writing a novel would be better than this sort of slow death of heartbreak. ***Reset***.

AMBROSIA

I feel like these thoughts are familiar. But I wanted to choose a different path this time. I couldn't accept things as they were.

All those experiences, all those times we had together, they must be real! It must be that God wanted me to live through that event, in order to carry out his mission, and that is why I have no wounds from that incident! There's no other reason for why I'm still alive. And how could my time with Nevras be false? No, I will deny this dream, and continue to pursue God's mission.

I noticed that I had been speaking aloud for much of this time. The others were staring. I spoke, “I claim the Crest of Chronos, Oracle of Time!” My hand began to glow again where the Crest was. With it, more memories came. Only, this time, it wasn't my past that I remembered so much as having total recall of all times reality was reset by God. I was now about halfway done with my quest. Of course, I was later to learn that things were not quite this simple. By the way, I was still speaking to myself...

THE WORLD

Deep underground, a small group olgoi khorkoi wormed their way out of a group of rocks. Hungry for food, they had managed to tunnel a cave in the mountains to the south of a shrine. They were much relieved that the land here was not like the frozen wasteland there. Soon they would have a long-overdue meal. And the area smelled of snake meat...

Elsewhere, the Phoenix castle was in an uproar. Permit me to rewind the action slightly, to about three hours ago. The man sat in the hall, a knife in his belt made from cold iron. Cold iron was different from regular iron, in that it was widely regarded as more incorruptible or pure (“cold” because it repelled other things), as it could reflect incoming magic, rust, and magnetism, and it was toxic to magical creature like fey or ghosts. It was regarded among metals as master of them all. Cold iron only became this way as a result of strong use for a purpose; for example, a sword always used for war, heirlooms always in service of a family, or money and tools with religious association. The process of repeated use for a single specific purpose changing the properties of the

metal was known as “becoming Faithful.” It was a reaction that changed the Original Intent of the object, and so great was the reaction that the metal could break if abused.

The man had been invited as a messenger. King Charis eyeing him, realized that he was too far away to be heard. Charis ordered, “We give you permission to step closer, messenger. Why are you here?” He mumbled. Victoria asked, “I cannot hear you. What is word from Kushiyama city? Please advance to the center of the room and repeat your message.” The man did indeed advance. As he did, he spoke. “I said, my message was that I was ordered to kill you. They promised to make me a baron if I succeeded,” he paused, “and you have put me within striking distance. Thank you.” So saying, he rushed forward, drawing his knife. The King was ready for the attack, however, and dodged out of the way. The assassin tried again, circling around him, and trying to stab from odd angles. This time, Charis stood his ground, and blocked with the sword; however, he never drew the blade, blocking instead with the scabbard. He did this at blinding speed, as though the assassin was going in slow motion. Victoria said, “Wait. Let me help.”

As has been said, cold iron repels magic and magnetism. But psionics isn't either. Soulfires are users of psionic abilities, which are divided into broad categories. Of these, the most common were Telekinesis, Healing, Shielding, and especially Pyrokinesis. Victoria wasn't quite a master, but she was adept at Telekinesis. The cannonball nearby had been frequently used, it was also cold iron, so were the manacles the would-be assassin was bound with. They could have killed him, but instead they gave him bread and wine, they helped him out, and spoke to him. What he said is not recorded here, but afterward they set him free again, to live his own life. The palace was in an uproar, as I said. But it was because of the assassination attempt, not its aftermath. The would-be baron, far from returning home was now kneeling to his King. He didn't want to serve other masters.

AMBROSIA

We made our way out from the shrine only to find that an opening had appeared in the nearby mountain, which was good, since the boats nearby weren't really going anywhere. It was weird, though, I hadn't heard or felt an earthquake... It was then that I saw my worst nightmare. More of those giant worms, this one was coming towards me right now.

As I say, these worms are giant burrowing critters that eat all kinds of stuff. They like compost and meat mostly though. Not that they'd eat us, they only eat carrion and maybe trash. Rather than just suck us up whole, these things were far more likely to eat our pumpkin, our snake meat, and the rations we had. I had also picked up some haggis after too much eating strange food on the road; after all, we I needed something normal.

Needless to say, they headed straight for our backpack. I wasn't about to allow that to happen. The others were fighting their own worms, but it was time for me to take revenge for those worms that stole my meat earlier. You dirty worms!

The worm lunged forward, yet I went with the flow, dodging its charge like a leaf pushed aside by the wind. As I stepped to the side, it drooled its paralytic saliva, but before it hit me, I instead rode on its back. A moment ago, I had hooked the olgoi khorkoi with my fishing pole, and like worms everywhere, it had an irrational need to become attached to a hook. The other worms, seeing the dreaded device, fled for their lives, but I managed to hang on for dear life. The critter was headed for a rock mass, apparently about to dive underground. I drew my knife and cut the line, giving the worm a quick stab so I wouldn't fall off and be crushed.

The reaction was immediate. The worm reeled in horror, and turned sharply to the right, scraping against the rock in the process. As I was riding on it, it scraped my leg hard and I slid off the beast. I let the knife drift down the segmented frame. Worms can regrow their tails, but a long cut across their body is another matter. The severed body twitched a bit, then quit. I had to kill rats in this past, but this was different. I had killed for no reason other than revenge. And watching a creature was only trying to feed itself breathe its last was somehow very sad. Worse, after they died, a bunch of protesters followed us with signs. «Save the Worms!» read one. «Khorkoi are not Vermin» read another. Actually, that's exactly what they are.

As the crowd had blocked the entrance to the cave, we decided to walk around.

Searching around the area, we found an old windmill. Inside, we saw a couple and two things. These two other... things were some sort of mud beings.

ELIAS

Those are golems. They are creatures of earth or stone or cobbled together materials, which are animated by some means. The original golem was a being of solid stone with the word אמת (spelled "*emeth*" or Truth) written on its forehead. According to legend, it was able to perform any tasks the user required, and if it needed to be deactivated , it was a simple matter of erasing the first letter, making it מת ("*meth*" or Death). And yet, these things seemed to be active for years, despite how easy it was to deactivate them.

A golem is mostly nonliving, although it can be made from organic parts, like kelp or fungi. These parts may themselves be alive even if the golem itself is not, making it possible to have a golem covered with mushrooms. This drew scholarly debates between the magical research communities whether if enough parts of a golem were replaced while retaining the inorganic core, the golem could be considered alive, which in turn deeply offended the chimera-lovers, who only believed their creatures could be called living, having been spliced genetically or in some cases stitched from live animal and/or plant parts. They did have a point.

AMBROSIA

Ummm, right, so they were called gollums. We talked to this man, asking him about these weird creatures. One of them was apparently male, and carved from solid stone. The other looked like a crude female. She was made from clay and her hair was grass. From asking them, we learned that the guy was Aerwin, and was the builder of these creatures. The woman, who was obviously married to him, introduced herself as Fiore. Aerwin told us, "I once lived a life filled with loneliness and despair. But in my desire to fix this, I crossed lines of science and morality. Still, the end result was worth it. Because I created life to keep me company, I gradually became more outgoing. The creature I created originally to take the place of a true love taught me how to love others, and I found my own match in the town." Apparently, from what we could gather, this man built the female critter first to act as a sort of surrogate love interest, to keep him from getting lonely. From what Elias tells me, normally such things wouldn't have real feelings, but ball of clay made from runes developed something similar to a soul. The lady thing started talking back to him and having real conversations. He was afraid when he brought a lady from town home, she would freak out. Instead, the lady told him to make a lover for this mudwoman. From the looks of it, they looked like they are ready to have a child. The woman, not the mudwoman.

After a while in there, we explored other places. A Lantern Seller had taken up camp outside the cave. I bought a lantern for about 750 Gold to replace my old one, which apparently lit without the use of oil. The lantern was powered by Lightning-bug Enticing Drawings (LED), these had makeshift runes written on sorcerer's alloy, or sometimes jade, both of which had the ability of *spell-etching* (which meant regular writing could become runes without sacrificing mystic power). This was a tremendous boon, as normally every time someone enchanted something, the mystic power of the caster got permanently embedded in those runes until dismissed, which permanently reduced the total mystic power of the caster. This meant that everyone making magical objects either had to figure out a loophole to indirectly enchant things, or find themselves at a very real risk of permanently running short of mystic power. The LED lantern was no Glow Orb, but it was made using indirect methods so that it could be mass-produced.

For 250 more Gold, she offered to throw in a bag capable of holding eight bombs. The fuse of the bomb had a striker on its side that lit the bomb, from there the holder would have about ten seconds to drop or throw the bomb before it exploded. It was very powerful both as a weapon and a tool, but in accordance with Dungeon Safe guidelines, it was not designed to destroy any walls/floor that were not already visibly cracked. The Council had spent a lot of time with alchemists creating bombs that would behave just so, even though it was not consistent with how the laws of physics normally worked.

The Lantern Seller also tried to sell us mounts. People over the years have tried to ride a number of things, and thanks to the power of runes, could usually get away with

charming creatures to buy time while they trained them as mounts. And of course, alchemy also was involved with making mechanical vehicles. She was trying to sell us ostrogoths, a type of four-legged flightless bird with a jet black “mane” of feathers capable of extreme speed enough to run over water. I refused. Not only were these expensive, but the speed they traveled was deadly for an inexperienced rider like us, if we fell or were thrown. We would also miss all the scenery.

Elias wanted to take Aqorm in to see the Great Library, so we headed over there. The place was huge. It was a giant library built on a rocky shore overlooking the beach. As every school child knows, because of the poles being at an west-east layout rather than a north-south, the sun rises in the north and sets in the south. This also means that areas off to the far eastern or western corners of the globe generally get almost no sun. I'm told that there is some reason why Kushiyama has relatively temperate weather while all around it is snow. It was something about a Lamb keeping people warm despite the hostile weather. I don't understand it, but maybe they huddle under this guy's fur. Anyway, a beachfront property to the east was ideal for viewing the sunrise and sunset. Not that we would want to stay overnight.

The inside of the building was a 15-floor warehouse. As with many libraries of this sort, the nonfiction was categorized by number followed by a name (such as 299 Tao) while the fiction had a category marker followed by a name (LP Alt for a large print book by John Altman), with some large print nonfiction just to further confuse people. I concluded that all librarians are evil and/or insane.

Each floor was by category, with the second floor upward divided halfway with a large back room that functioned as a space for the librarians to rest and relax, from the looks of it. First floor and top floor, however, stretched all the back. The first floor was fiction divided three ways LP, YA, and J (large print, young adult, and juvenile). Second floor was for regular fiction, while third was B for biography. Fourth through thirteenth floors were nonfiction from 000 to 999, split by hundreds, subdivided by decimal points in some way I couldn't understand. Fourteenth floor was OS (over-sized books), some of which were large enough that they couldn't be moved without help. The top floor, as I mentioned, was the only other floor besides the first that led all the way back, ending in a group of stairs to a roof exit overlooking the sea. This floor was marked under categories with MAG, THM, MYS, S, and BLU. I couldn't make sense of it. I wonder what those are about?

ELIAS

Our library also had a hidden reference section, but only the librarians were to know about this. To answer Ambrosia's question, those symbols stand for the following. MAG was for Magic, for books of magic and sorcery. These were books that taught magic to others, and usually each book contained the theory behind just a single spell, or a group of closely related spells. The wonder-worker would often wind up recopying the contents of the book, compressing an entire effect into a few words. Because of how complicated it was to learn a new spell, a prepared spellbook wouldn't help anyone as only the writer understood their spells. THM stood for Thaumaturgy, I was a scholar not a cleric, and learned my prayers like spells, whereas clerics simply prayed for effects and let whoever they prayed to (usually God) carry it out. MYS stood for Mysteries, and had the larger theory on basically anything in reality. This section had books on the theory of sorcery, alchemy, or martial arts techniques too, essentially being a catch-all for books written for those trying to learn secrets. Still, since these often used riddles to guard their secrets, many of these remained Mysteries. S was for Scrolls, and these were assorted vellum scrolls, and could be subdivided by tacking on another prefix, such as S THM for a scroll about Thaumaturgy, S MYS for a martial arts scroll, or S 900 for a scroll depicting historical events. Finally, BLU stood for Blueprints, these were divided between architectural, engineering, and alchemy blueprints. These were never subdivided as S BLU, since the average blueprint was made of foil/laminate, and wasn't mixed with common vellum.

Now, the average person may ask why these weren't in the floors below. The simple answer is that these did not belong with other books. Scrolls and Blueprints did not even

properly fit on shelves, they were instead placed in clear tubes which were in turn placed in barrels. Mysteries were everything from spiral notebooks, to tract pamphlets, to actual paintings, to baked or carved tablets, to bound books filled with poetry, art, or riddles. Divinity books tended to push secular books away from them, while the Thaumaturgy category were unreadable if you had no magical potential. While many of the books below had a simple rune to prevent removal from the library, some of these were so dangerous that they were chained so they couldn't leave the immediate area.

Ambrosia proceeded to read several kid's stories. She started with *The Giant Ever-Exploding Head*, «Once, when humanity was still young, a man wished he could watch humanity forever, as a giant head. However, years of viewing violence, betrayal, and cruelty ultimately made his head explode into a million pieces. Since he had wished to be able to watch forever, his head reformed itself, but every now and then, his head explodes again. Be careful what you wish for, it may be granted.» By the way, kid's stories nowadays don't have all that terrible censorship so kids get all that unwholesome goodness. The only essentials to a children's book are short length and a moral lesson.

She read another one, *Attack of the Killer Snowmen*, «Long ago, in the snowy plains there was a man who enjoyed crafting snowmen and snow-women. The townspeople warned him. "Raise up no more snowmen than you can safely put down." But, he was arrogant, so he didn't listen. He crafted a whole village filled with snowmen, snow-women, snow-squirrels, snow-dogs, snow-trees, and snow-houses. Then he used his secret snowcraft technique to animate them. The town was abustle with movement, and began to roll snow into trade goods. But the townsfolk feared the army of snow-folk which had been made overnight, and they refused to buy goods made from snow. The snow-folk began to suffer, and in anger they started rolling snow-swords, and snow-cannons The townsfolk fought valiantly with their torches, but their numbers were too great. The next morning the entire town was frozen solid, except for the house of the snow-builder. The snow-builder then swore revenge on the snow-folk, praying for sunlight to come destroy them. But it never came, since this was the town of Winter. And so he got over his revenge, and lived peacefully with the snow-folk»

After that, she read *The Bloody Pet Shovel*, «Long ago, before society was like it is today, there was an old woman living by herself in a hut. She often wished she had a son or daughter to take care of, or someone for company. One day, she was buying supplies when she saw an old shovel in the shop. "Perhaps," she said, "I could convince myself that this shovel is my child." As she was getting senile, she figured it would be only a few years before she believed this anyway. So she came home with the shovel, and placed it in a chair. When it was time to eat, she moved it to the dinner table, and when it was time to sleep, she moved it to the bed. But the shovel would not eat, and would not sleep. So she asked the local Druid to animate the shovel, to have a companion. The Druid told her, "Give it blood for three years, and it will live as your child." The old woman told the Druid's advice, and soon began to feed her blood to the shovel, coating it with the fluids of her body. The shovel began to hop around, and did chores for her. For a time she was happy, but gradually as she gave blood she began to get weaker. She called the Druid back and asked another favor. "I am getting weak, would you watch over my shovel?" The Druid stayed to take care of her, and gradually as she was losing blood, the shovel began to notice, and hopped toward the garden. The shovel dug holes, and planted crops and herbs for her to eat, and the Druid helped raise them. Gradually, the woman recovered and awoke from her weakness. When she awoke, the shovel was nowhere to be found. Instead, a young girl was found digging holes and planting herbs in the garden. The woman, the girl, and the Druid lived together in the house for the rest of their lives.» Ambrosia was weeping by the end, as was Zoe. I didn't really get it, but Aqorm seemed to like it so I let her enjoy it.

I decided to also do some light reading. I picked up a book known as 道人怡 or loosely translated as *The Way*. It appeared to be a treatise discussing why Taoism and Christianity were both called the Way, and how this wasn't one of the devil's tricks but rather both teachings were an incomplete part of a complete truth. I read some of it, «Heaven and Earth are in accord with the Tao. Humanity can observe the Tao, yet like all laws, we can never measure up. Can a human ever be as nurturing as the Earth, always

giving bounty? Can a human ever be a open as Heaven? Live in harmony with nature, yet remember what it is to be human. Your failings may be forgiven, for this too may be the Tao of humanity.» I decided this book was garbage and tossed it back on the shelf in disgust. Next I picked up a book called *The Story of God*. It was about how God created the earth as a result of extreme loneliness and boredom, and how men and women were as a result of God separating himself off. Azrael had begun to read a small stack of books on Exorcism. “Hmmm,” she said, “I can definitely use this to improve my technique.” I realized that if she were to keep reading, I would perhaps become irrelevant. Aqorm would insist that I got left behind because I wasn't as talented. I decided to get studying.

I found several books on the art of alchemy, and spending the afternoon learning how to brew several potions from commonly found materials. I made Potions from herbs, High Potions from Potions, High Mana from Mana Waters, and I was even able to make a Frog Tonic. I was a long way from turning other objects into gold or making a Philosopher's Stone, though.

I also learned that there are two types of alchemy that blueprints can be used for. There is Synthesis and Crafting. Crafting is manually objects like potions, while Synthesis uses a supernatural effect to transmute matter using an alchemy circle. Synthesis allows mass production of okay quality items. This is fine for laying wood on a circle and converting it to a canoe. But synthesized items don't last more than a few days of use, so a lasting item like a house is not advisable, though making a temporary hut would be sufficient. This is precisely because when a person making something with their hands, Original Intent develops in response to construction, while neither Synthesis nor runes can produce Original Intent. Synthesized items are also barely real, so while I can perhaps synthesize temporary vehicles or tools, trying to make bread or other food using Synthesis... it would wind up being completely tasteless. It was junk food.

But Alchemy was not just about making items, there were blueprints also about elemental alchemy. Despite my poor elemental magic proficiency, I could still use this. Alchemy was a science after all. Using the Second Corollary of Catalystic Sacrifice, it was determined that “every object has stored potential energy used to create effects.”

I studied a few basic blueprints, but focused mainly on understanding potion crafting and Elemental Synthesis instead. I learned a few of these Elemental Synthesis: Fire Bomb, Ice Canister, Lightning Rod, and Wind Shears. Since we already had an All-Terrain Vehicle, we had no need to build temporary transports. Ultimately, I left most of those blueprints untouched, focusing on using my alchemy for healing and combat.

Having thoroughly studied, we decided to take a break. We entered the chamber that walled off much of the 2nd to 14th floors, and visited with my old teachers. I had grown up around these librarians and scholars but they weren't very talkative, and I couldn't remember half of their names. After a rest, and a pot luck dinner (we added our snake meat to a rice dish, while they brought several vegetable side dishes, along with a main course of roast chicken), we once again set out on the road. The tender, almost fishy taste of the snake left us wanting more. Thankfully, the protesters had gotten over their nonsense, and the path to the nearby cave was once again clear. Damned hippies.

CHAPTER 15

In which a large amount of time is spent underground and/or underwater.

AMBROSIA

Anyway, the cave was fairly dark, but our lantern helped. At the entrance, we found a number of rocks blocking our way. Using the Gigas Gloves, I carefully pushed boulders out of place to create a path. The next room had a swarm of bats flying around, and a dwarf mining off to the side. I had never actually seen a dwarf, but they are easily recognizable.

In the old Earth, people decided to make a distinction between dwarves and midgets, declaring that midgets were healthy and just shorter than normal, and dwarves had a body deformity. They also declared the term midget offensive. Let me clear a few things up. Besides the subliminal impression that being normal is somehow offensive, this is

completely false. A dwarf is simply a runt, a creature smaller than others of its species, there is nothing in the term that declares that something which is a dwarf most have limbs that are not in proportion. In fact, there is no such thing as a “midget,” the term was slang that P.T. Barnum came up with. Dwarves were simply shorter people.

I say were. Under political correctness, people pretended to care for such folk. But as years went by, these same people kept dwarves apart from the general population as a so-called special interest group. They told them that it was to protect their minority status but their real thoughts were closer to wanting them to breed with their own kind. Gradually, through repeated breeding and inbreeding among other dwarves, they actually became a separate race. Eventually, one ruler decided that short people “ain't got no reason to live,” and declared that they be hunted down. In desperation, many of them took to hiding in caves. True to the Lamarck's laws, the dwarves living underground began to develop night-vision of an advanced degree, their diet changed to include mushrooms and insects, and because of their constant exposure to land mana, they developed a thick extra layer of skin which was capable of screening out incoming magic. Dwarves could be subject to magic cast indirectly, but unlike the atheists who had an antimagic field around them, they could not be blindsided. Someone could cause an earthquake under them or wrap them up with vines, which would not happen to an atheist. But unlike atheists, they can be shot in the back with a Fire spell and not notice.

This dwarf was male, and clearly quite distracted by the process of mining with pick and shovel. He ignored several calls to him, until finally he stopped and turned around, “Did ye call me, lass?” I asked him what he was doing. “Why,” he answered, “I'm building a railroad here!” I shook my head, “A railroad? Travel is usually done by ship. It's better for the most part. True there's all sorts of storms, but still...”

Railroads and other such large machines had largely taken a hit in terms of usage. About the only ones who even still knew how to make such complicated moving parts were the dwarves, and the same for the steam engine. Most people simply couldn't work moving parts, so they couldn't make this. The closest equivalent used were called ley sleds, a large sled-like device that predictably traveled along the ley lines, using an elf to move the device. The dwarf grumbled, “For years, those derned seafarers have lorded over us, with their 'ships.' But if I finish this here railroad, people will have to depend on dwarves instead!” I nodded, humoring him, “I see...” He continued ranting and mumbling, as I slowly walked away, shaking my head. “Oy,” he called out, “I'm looking for me girl. If you see a dwarf lass mining down yonder, tell her I'm this way.”

The next area had a section of rock that was loosely forming a gate. We peeped through, and behind the wall was a large treasure chest. Looking around the room there was a small metal door with no keyhole, but two slots for a block to be placed. The area nearby had a number of small blocks with numbers on them from zero to nine. I realized that this gate was keyed to a puzzle, and probably would not open without the correct numeric password. So I decided to read the plaque. «I am a number below 100. I can be divided by any number up to 6, except for five. Two different sets of these numbers mentioned above can be multiplied together to make me. The square root of myself is not a whole number. Most importantly, when I am multiplied by myself, I become a number that is truly gross. What number am I?» My math skills have always been horrible. I tried some random number. For some reason, I believed 64 was the perfect number.

But it wasn't the case here. A boulder dropped from the ceiling, and chased after us, until finally we dived to a side passage. Uhhhh, let's try this again. Elias offered, “Try 12.” I picked up the one and two blocks and slid them into the plate. To my surprise, they clicked in neatly, and the gate opened. I looked dumbfounded at him, despite all of us having evidence that he was brilliant and scholarly. He explained the puzzle for about ten minutes, while we opened the chest. We found a series of old-style diving suits. They had some alterations, particularly made to the back, to make it convert water into air, but they were more like diving armor from the 1880s than they were like anything made by modern alchemy. We decided to hold off putting on these things. Instead, we opened up a tent in a nearby save point.

ELIAS

It is well known that party tents have no physical weight beyond maybe that of a normal tent, since they are basically operating under warped space, and can potentially be the weight of an entire town pulled basically out of one's pocket. Essentially, I travel into the space of the tent, I don't summon the space outside the tent. Because of this, we were able to exploit this to the absolute limit, opening the tent and shoving massive amounts of diving suits in, then closing it behind. Well, to be fair, the tent already had a full-sized bed inside, and in Galaxia, we had hired a banker and a priest to handle stuff like keeping our accounts straight and helping us revive. Oh, maybe I didn't mention that there we people living inside this tent 24/7. I'm sure they won't mind tossing stuff into the tent.

Azrael asked to borrow Ambrosia's knife. “Why,” she asked her, “what will you do with it?” She mumbled the word **Apport**, and then she carved a small square in the ground where the save point stood. She then carved a series of arrows. They seemed to need to be in a direct path from each other, so it was tricky. As we wandered through the cave, fighting off bats and goblins and all sorts of other creatures (such as the dreaded giant flatworm), she paid none of us any mind, her concentration wholly focused on the effect. In the beginning there was no sign that what she was doing was amounting to anything, but lately these arrows had taken to glowing. When we finally got to an underground lake, she was sweating hard, and her eyes looked bloody. Not bloodshot, she was bleeding from her eyes. Whatever she was doing was strenuous enough to not do as a regular feat. At long last, she carved another square in the path of the arrows. Up went the small patch of land with the save point etched on it, and down went Azrael.

AZRAEL

Soulfires are not the only ones who can use psionic abilities, there were talented wonder-workers who had learned to do some of these, but most were basically something that normal people required concentration enough to trigger nosebleeds, or worse. A Soulfire had a brain designed to tune psychic energy without damage. This is what happened here, I used an ability that didn't really suit me, and as a result, I strained my body and mind greatly. But I had little time to think this as I collapsed in a heap. I awoke much later in our tent with a splitting headache.

I had two psionic abilities, my Apport, and my Sensory abilities, specifically the ability to see and talk to ghosts. But because I had an affinity for spirits and because the latter was a passive ability, only the former ever caused me strain. I awoke after some effort, before laying down again with intervention from outside. “Shhhh,” said Zoe, “rest now. You overstrained yourself.” Zoe and Elias looked exhausted from caring for me.

After we had fully rested, we began to unpack the diving armor. As we helped each other into it, we stumbled towards the water, walking down a long and winding underwater slope. It was very slow progress, as these atmospheric diving suits were not built for movement but rather protection against all manner of pressure and current. Even underwater, it was absurdly difficult to move. Aqorm would not have needed them at all, except that as we descended, eventually the water pressure became more and more severe. She had decided not to wear one, and it looked like she was in some pain because of it. Several hours later, we descended to the deepest depths of the sea. Thankfully, the suits provided limitless amounts of air without the need of old-fashioned external pumps or limited scuba setup, or all of us would have met a watery end, possibly being noticed in the Afterlife by Elder Formless who slept below. According to rumor, this is what happens to all who die under the sea. I shudder to think about this. In any case, the underground and underwater cave opened into a much larger space as we exited the rock walls. We saw urchins, stingrays, lanternfish, and the weirdly cute scotoplanes (originally called “sea pigs” but then some showed up on land, and they couldn't be called “land pigs”) as we wandered through different depths. I was not so thrilled to leave the cave section, once I saw what awaited us. At the gate towards Aquamundo, the underwater metropolis floated a Gate Guardian, a serpent dragon apparently made of glass. I did not like our odds. Not one bit, I tell you.

Most people believe glass is fragile. In actual fact, most glass breakage is due to poor crystalline structure, or because of stress-fracture. It actually has much higher hardness and strength than many materials, but it appears fragile because of these issues. The

Kool-Aid Man would indeed be able to smash through a wall, given weight proportionate to size, and a thick body with good crystalline arrangement. Oh yeah! As we could see, the dragon's body appeared to be made of some sort of flexible glass, so I was going to wager that our chances of attacking this with weapons was basically zero. Oh no!

Sure enough, when Ambrosia tried to slash at the creature with her First Material knife, it simply shattered. Nevras told her, “Push the broken bits together!” There were internal communicators in each suit, so conversation was possible here.

Sure enough, fitting the knife like a jigsaw puzzle, she was able to piece together two pieces, then another two, until it was whole again. Similar to a wound closing about itself, the blade fused itself together. After fusing, the material healed even more cleanly that a living thing. I couldn't see any sort of scar. First Material was truly incredible.

Nevras decided to rely on techniques rather than risking his weapon as well. But the glass was simply too sturdy. Elias said, “We need a strategy!” Now, Elias is more of a bookworm for many things but I understand metaphysics, the paranormal, and elemental theory better. The latter was immediately useful, as I remembered how glass behaves when exposed to sudden heat and cold. “Zoe,” I called out, “use Fire, and keep it coming! I'll delay an Ice spell.” Delaying thaumaturgy was dangerous if someone didn't know what they were doing, but allowed one to charge up a high level of power. But I needed to time the spell properly, so I decided to delay. Zoe did indeed try to build the Fire runes in a consistent pattern, but the heat kept getting reduced by the sheer amount of water. All of this effort only managed to create boiling water. She cast over and over, but the dragon was unfazed. I called out, “Zoe!” She turned. “Do you know how to use Druidfire?” Druidfire, or aether, was a combination of the five elements. For many casters, it was impossible without years of experience with all the elements. This was why being able to cook food with aether was a career-builder. Druids, however, were supposed to have this ability as practically their birthright. Apparently not, though, as Zoe started to sweat and shake her head. “Nah, I didn't learn it,” she admitted. I called out to Ambrosia, “Can you use your new powers from Chronos to slow this thing down?” She nodded, “I can do more than that, I can freeze it in place.” She did an elaborate dance, and the dragon was coated with a greyish film. Still, she told us, “It'll only stay until I run out or energy.” I called back to Zoe, “Alright, now is your chance to learn! Keep trying until you get it.”

Lest there be any confusion, since earlier I said rain disrupts runes, it is possible to use runes underwater. If it were not, countless people would have died trying to refresh a Water Breathing spell. It's just a matter of properly using the runes. It's like this, there are runes big enough to be seen on the visible level. There are smaller runes which form those runes, made from mystic power, those which can only be seen with a microscope. These coexist with atoms and molecules, and are sometimes influenced by them. That is, with rain, the water molecules hitting a series of runes moves fast enough that it manages to knock them apart into smaller runes. This is not the case for a body of water. The runes do get damp while forming together, but the motion is gradual so there is little danger of dispersing runes. Elemental affinity is still an issue though. It is absurdly hard to use fire runes while surrounded on all sides by water, just as water magic is difficult in the desert.

Zoe cupped her hands and tried to draw several different runes into the same space. No sooner did she try to push them in proximity than the runes began to attack each other. The effect fizzled out. She tried again, but no matter what she seemed to do, it fell apart.

Ambrosia's trigram was slowly fading in its glow. It couldn't hold this creature much longer. Soon the dragon would be free to attack us once again...

ZOE

I'm not quite as sharp about using my mystic power as Azrael. I can barely scribe silent runes, I could counterspell, but mainly only by casting elemental spells, and my reflexes weren't good enough to not cast the wrong counterspell once in a while. Combining five elements into one magic? I was not that confident. When I tried to do this, it felt vaguely like juggling, I was trying to keep the fire runes from getting consumed by the water all around us, and the water or air runes would simply blend in with our surroundings. I tried stringing the runes together in an array, to join these elements together so they wouldn't be canceled out by our surroundings.

This didn't work either. The elements began to interact with either other, and basically wound up forming hot mud. I was totally at a loss what to do. Not that I had much chance to think about it. The temporal stasis thing around the dragon was beginning to flicker and fade. As the grey receded around the beast and it stirred, it glanced around until it noticed Azrael. She was still gathering energy for her big spell, and it wouldn't do much good unless I hit the creature first. Oh crap.

The dragon sucked in water to fill its lungs, preparing to spit out a mix of glass at its target. I had to get in front of Azrael before she got hit, but with the heavy swimming armor I was moving too slowly. I waddled towards her making it just in time to push her out of the way. Her armor flopped over, and while she lay prone, her hands continued to be cupped, building her runes yet further. What concentration! On the other hand, I was now directly in the path of the shards of glass.

My life began to flash before my eyes as I saw the shards move closer and closer. Of course, with my many reincarnations, this was less of a panicked moment and more of a long film. I suddenly became aware that many moments of flashback had passed, yet I was not impaled by thousands of tiny shards. In fact, it was nowhere to be found. In its place was a pillar of flame extending inches around me. What was happening?

AZRAEL

"There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends." I thought about that saying when I saw what happened. The aether came out not because of any skill, but directly in response to her actions. Her eyes glowed golden for a second, then the pillar of aether spouted at full blast, before it gathered toward her hand and it settled to a manageable size.

Aether was supposed to be incredibly easy to manage once formed, as a type of energy which had all the elemental characteristics. A person could freeze something or make plants grow just as easily as they could burn something, and while it definitely had the traits of fire, it didn't get snuffed the same way as fire. In fact, the only thing said to be able to stop Druidfire was to run out of mystic power.

The flames glowed a deep green, evaporating the water nearby. It wasn't being snuffed at all, instead the water was being absorbed, parting the water with the intense heat. I called out, "Throw it!" Zoe tossed the stuff at her target, coating the dragon in such heat that its glass turned solid red. I followed up with the ice attack I had spent such time on. "*Absolute Zero*!" I incanted. Of course, it wasn't real absolute zero, but the spell created a powerful beam of ice. This beam was cold enough to strip heat from the nearby air, scattering outward and freezing whatever it touched. Elias had prepped us some by casting a protection against cold so the extreme temperatures did not freeze our metal suits. After the aether dissipated, the water came rushing in, only to be stopped once again by the extreme cold.

The sudden change of temperature created a hairline crack, which in term created tension that spread all the way to the core of the glass. The glass shattered with a high-pitched sound, leaving only the naked wyrm. The Gate Guardian was still a tough creature but Aqorm and Nevras lunged and stabbed at it. Ambrosia tried once again to slash at the dragon with her knife, but it was too late. The dragon's soul left the body as a small glowing orb. "Awww crud," I said, speaking in an uncharacteristically casual manner. Ambrosia's mannerisms were beginning to rub off on me. I explained, "if we do not stop the departure of that dragon soul, it may attempt to reanimate itself." Dragons, unlike other living things, had no Afterlife set aside specifically for them. Instead, they had a ball of spirit known as the dragon soul, which they decide what to do with. If the dragon was soundly beaten, the spirit would be weak, and often becomes part of the natural world, since the energy of so-called "dragon lines" had a vitalizing effect on the land nearby. On the other hand, if the dragon still had some fight left in it, it might often come back in a weaker form, or attempt to reincarnate. We hadn't seen the last of it.

The ice was melting, so it was time to head out. The water began to creep in, clearing our path. As it did, more of the ice melted until we were walking through ice cold water. The open areas narrowed through a stretch of natural rock, leading us to a small city.

This must be Aquamundo, the second underwater city, and the first to be built underwater. I imagine people have heard about the first one. Atlantis began as an island filled with great civilization. It used to be as big as a small continent, then one day, it disappeared. Nobody above water knows why. Aquamundo was slightly less impressive in comparison. As a town, Aquamundo was basically a libertarian paradise. It had no laws to speak of, and police only interfered to enforce personal squabbles such as unpaid loans or faulty products. The only other real government interference I saw at all was that many of the young virginal men were fed to the dragon (something about wanting to appease it). Like I said, Aquamundo was a wonderful town with no state oppression.

Without government, this meant everything (especially the houses) was privately built. It was Aquamundo's belief that everyone must be an architect of their own life, so houses built from coral and underwater rock littered the streets. The better places had no windows or those made of a metallic glass somehow made to be incredibly transparent and just as strong, and were built with floors designed to drain water away. Those that... weren't the better ones were flooded with water all the way up to the top, had dangerous animals like sharks inside the houses, or were just uncomfortable to humans that didn't have eight legs for traction.

Having met with some heavy resistance getting here, we decided to purchase a fair amount of items and equipment. Neither I nor Ambrosia really needed anything, but Nevras arranged to have his blade tipped with fused obsidian for some added sharpness. Obsidian normally is sharp enough to cut more sharply than even steel, the problem of course being that as a ceramic blade, the edge chips easily and becomes blunt, if not outright shattering. After many centuries of work, alchemists effectively managed to obsidian fragments into a sort of rock glass, allowing the keen edge to retain while also preventing shattering if the sword was dropped. So to summarize, he now had a Fused-Obsidian Durasteel Katana. The diving suits were armor enough, so we opted out on that, but we were relieved to not have to wear helmets indoors. We spent much of the rest of the time shopping for food and recovery items, and then spent time in the inn.

Elias found an alchemist's Mixing Pot at one of the shops, suitable for larger scale projects. While resting, he worked tirelessly and managed to convert our items into high-grade recovery tools. We now had five Jade Elixirs (a potion which recovered general health and mystic power on multiple targets), ten Ruby Elixirs (only enough for one person yet able to heal completely and remove multiple ailments including death), a few servings of Phoenix Meat, and some Healing Herbs. Elias made an extra Ruby Elixir and Jade Elixir, then he showed up with some plant he called a Level Root after searching around. He apparently had big plans for this later. But we left him inside the inn with Aqorm. Ambrosia bought a For Sale Sign, which she immediately used to sell some items to some random person passing by. She wound up making back most of the money we spent and reducing our load in terms of critter trash.

We went to a priest to save, because it was basically unthinkable to ever try to defeat that dragon again. After this, we explored the town, talking to random people. From them, we learned that originally these people had in fact come from Atlantis. They were a race of powerful psychics, who built cities out of raw mental power. They seemed to be too embarrassed to admit what actually caused Atlantis to sink, so we'd probably not find out until later. Since their city was fast crumbling under the pressure of the deep sea, they somehow rapidly adapted to the change to survive underwater. Some of them claimed God made them evolve. In any case, after many centuries they went from psychic masters to a race of sea creatures with many different subgroups: the squidlings, the merfolk, the sahagin, and the selkie. Outsiders referred to all of these as merfolk even if some technically weren't. Of these, the selkie were the most adaptable, as they could disguise themselves as seals, or slide off their upper seal-skin to become a human/seal hybrid, or shed their skin entirely to walk on two legs as humans.

They also talked in great length about the Gate Guardian we had just faced, and how it had protected their city above the water as a flying dragon, until the situation changed, and it formed a glass shell in response. From the sound of it, it was probably a good idea to talk to the village elder. We wouldn't want this dragon flying back around and destroying the city, after all.

ELIAS

While the others explored town, I tossed my ingredients in a pot together, being careful to follow the right procedure. The Level Root was crushed into a powder, then stirred together into the cauldron with Ruby and Jade Elixirs. Aqorm was watching the whole thing. I had to alternate, mixing one part powder by two parts of each liquid. Each part was a teaspoon , since the metric system had gone by the wayside (except when measuring temperature, which had been converted into Double Celsius or ℂ for short, as a result of concluding that Fahrenheit had far more degrees of accuracy, but the idea of starting a measurement at something other than the freezing and boiling point of water was just stupid). Aqorm asked “What are you doing?” Once the powder was completely expended, I would have to distill the mass, extracting the water soluble compounds of the Level Root from the denser solids, adding more liquids to repeat the process until no powder remained, and then continuing to condense the distilled gas until the resulting liquid cooked down to a solid. This process finished in a few hours, completely taking away concentration from her, yet I could tell that she stood nearby. There were some remains of the two elixirs, leaving behind a thick yellow liquid which did not appear to respond at all to heat. I strained this out to use as a fire retardant, while I worked on condensing the other liquid. “I'm working on crafting a Philosopher's Stone,” I finally responded. Her look of shock told me that she had studied the lore, and could appreciate that this was no mere side project.

This process of condensing must take a week, due to both the considerations of the actual work involved, and since there were actual ritual needs for it to take this long or fail outright. I would have Aqorm notify the others that I would meet them in the next major town later, if they would wait for me. Traveling alone might be an issue, but it would provide an opportunity for me to test out my alchemy abilities. I would miss Aqorm, but hopefully, I would be able to rejoin everyone. With the Philosopher's Stone, I would be able to achieve the dream of any scholar, the ability to create high-grade alchemy. Elixirs of long life, lead into gold, all of these would be a simple matter. But I had to do this carefully, or I would wind up with some sort of sludge. I mustn't allow her to distract me. She walked off to give me some space to perform my work. At least, I think that's why she walked off.

AMBROSIA

Finding the Water Queen and Water King was no trouble at all, we just looked for the biggest house. I talked to the woman first, “Hi there! Can you tell about...” Glancing at me, she said, “Ah yes, I know that face. Father and daughter look so similar. Your father knew us well, and blessed our oceans with his presence.” Puzzled, I tried talking to her husband, “Excuse me! We have to make our way to the surface. But the last we saw, there was a giant dragon. I was wondering if you could perhaps tell the dragon to go away.” He nodded, then he too stared at my face as if struck by something. “It is no problem,” he said, “I will summon the dragon right outside so you can deal with it permanently. Your request is no trouble...” Well, to be honest, I wanted him to shoo it away, not bring it closer. He continued, “not for his child. As it happens, I knew your father. I will do anything for His children. Especially one who is the Oracle.” I was suddenly more interested, “What?!? I knew my father was a wealthy merchant, but I didn't think his influence reached to even the deep oceans here.” He shook his head, “You are mistaken, I knew your real father.” There was something fishy about the way they were saying the words 'his' and 'father' but I couldn't put my finger on it.

In any case, we left town to the east, walking along a sloped hill toward the surface. Elias had left the party for now, agreeing to rejoin us much later. Aqorm looked a little sad, but I could tell she understood that this was part of his goals. We passed an area with a stone gateway. The gate had something written in the Fey language. Apparently whoever had this written decided to enlist the help of aquatic elves, as there was no unified written language known by the outside world from the undersea species. As tempting as it was to say “friend” here, I knew enough of Fey to know that it was actually sort of impossible to pronounce. «Here lies the gateway to Atlantis. The gate is closed for the time being to tourists while we repair our... water slide» read Aqorm. It was clear she

was skeptical that any sort of water slides existed, given that Fey was a language of images and memories, but she shrugged as we walked past. That would have to wait. We climbed the underwater path with our suits and headed toward the surface.

AQORM

While I was definitely excited that Elias was working on such an ambitious project, I felt torn since his work was causing him to lose sight of me. No, I'm not so emotionally immature that I get separation anxiety, but having to basically walk in the opposite direction when we had only recently developed a relationship, well, let's just say that while I'm a half-elf, I'm still human in any way that counts. I just have a longer view.

A Philosopher's Stone was the holy grail of alchemy. It had been developed by the half-elf Sophophilus during the Second Great Industrial Revolution, which I imagine is predictable since a human didn't have a long enough lifespan and a true elf wouldn't care much for most of the things the Stone would do. The Stone could be used to make an elixir for lengthening life, for turning lead into gold, and even for raising the newly dead. It was also a conduit for using alchemy without a catalyst as sacrifice, allowing people to generate massive amounts of energy. Therefore, God had decided that such a tool must be tied to the lifespan of the user, causing it to crumble to dust on their death.

That Elias was even attempting it was an impressive goal, but at the same time, it filled me with sadness. Most of those who tried had failed. Historically, in fact, only seven people succeeded, and with the exception of Nick Flamel most of them were extremely long-lived already. Those who failed usually wound up drunk and bitter, not to mention angry for the rest of their lives. It required immense effort and research, only to fail for reasons unknown, despite having a clear recipe.

This much was on my mind as I continued up the path, as I examined the writing on the gate, as I walked further and further away. He was isolating himself, he was working so hard, and I was leaving him alone in hopes that it would help give him the space he needed to have success. But if he messed up, he would feel awful, and there would be nobody nearby to cheer him up!

The path finally broke the surface of the water. We crawled up the banks and peeled off the super-heavy swimming armor, only to come face to face with a large and rather angry serpent dragon. Its whiskers twitched, then it growled. For those who have never heard a dragon roar, it's an experience. Consider a kitten mewing, and then a full grown lion. Now consider a snake hiss by the same analogy, only the “lion” here is roughly the size of three-story tavern (and far bigger if we're talking about elder dragons).

This was the Gate Guardian from before? It was horrifying! Its teeth and skin were covered in a greenish shade and its body was showing signs of rot. The battle was, if possible, even more difficult than the last one. It appeared to have grown in size in the absence of a glass outer coating on its skin, and the dragon had some sort of aura surrounding it. When Nevras and Zoe tried short range attacks, they found this out after they were covered in acid. I kept waiting for Elias to cast some quick prayer to clear them up, but he was not here. It wound up being up to Azrael to quickly flush off the substance before it dissolved their hair and skin. The dragon snarled, and responded with a slash from some sharp claws. As its clawed hands as big as a terrier dug into my friend, she went down for the count. Zoe tried to heal her, but her Revive prayer was nowhere near as effective as a resurrection, and simply couldn't bind together wounds like that. Not that it mattered. The dragon breathed out a wide spray of some type of aggressive microorganism, causing their bodies to rot in front of my eyes. I was slightly back from them so I lived just long enough to see it summon a Grim. No, Grims aren't related to Reapers, but they do cause death. They are a spirit that if it touches a body, severs the bond between the body and the spirit. Some magic can fend them off, but Azrael had already died from the rot, and neither I nor Zoe knew how to repel that effect.

GOD

Reset. The party died five other times after that one, I simply figured it would be better not to subject you to that sort of thing over and over. Without their cleric providing support, their teamwork had holes, and the dragon's abilities were able to cause instant death. It was time for me to do something.

There was a reason I came up with my Reset ability. It was not originally for the party at all, but rather invented for me to escape the consequences of my own mistakes. The countless worlds that weren't good for life? They were Resets that I decided to keep as examples of what not to do. The same was true of deer. Myself damn it, deer are stupid. The ability to reset reality sounds like a convenient escape, but if poor conditions persist, the flaw of this is to get stuck in a repeating loop.

I initially decided to do the whole angels from the sky and massive miracle overload. My angels were immune to the death effect, since their bodies and souls are one. They are immune to decay and the acid as well, and their swords chopped the dragon into bite-sized pieces before the group could even blink. I clearly hadn't remembered what happened in Biblical times. It triggered a deus ex machina ripple, and humans were stripped of all free will. Humans always ask, “If God is good, why does he allow evil? God must not be real because (some minor evil) happened to me.” Ummm yeah, about that. Let's stop and think here. What is life like when humans have no evil? Not just no Knowledge of Good and Evil, but are stripped of it? Well, since you can't imagine, I'm going to show you.

Reality wavered around the group and the effect spread outward to even people watching from a distance. Gone were their personalities. Their dreams. Their will. Their hopes. Their drive. Without the concept of free will, and the desire to do their own thing, they had only one desire: to be **perfect** and to be loved by me. Everyone, regardless of what they were thinking before, immediately took to their knees and asked, “How can I help you, Lord? I will sacrifice all for your sake.” I don't like the idea of burnt offerings or sacrifices, so I hastily said, “Fuck that! Go jump in the water over there and drown!” And to the best of their ability, everyone but Aqorm managed just that.

I am not all-good. I never said I was, humans just interpreted me thus. I give misfortune to humans. Some misfortune happens because I am lazy or bored. Some of it happens because testing humans allows them to grow. But behind Oz the Great and Powerful, the whole impressive God image you humans like to see, I'm just a humbug.

I don't care for humans blindly worshiping me. I don't need it, and frankly it sucks. While if I did something nice, humans can thank me, but stop groveling. What happens when you take away evil is that humans become eager-to-please puppets. Altruism is something I didn't want but I'm no psycho either, I just want living things to live. I want them to make mistakes. I rarely use Reset to correct the actions of normal people unless they clearly need a do-over. In any case, this was a good time to try again. Oh yes, and before you ask, “omniscience” is simply the result of endless do-overs. I could give myself that ability, but I left it instead to prophets. I find it boring and depressing to know everything that could happen to people.

This time, I outright used my power to blast it to dust. Surely, they wouldn't go all crazy over one destruction effect, especially if I made it look like something else killed it. Unfortunately... selective effects were always an issue of mine. The attack intended to just wipe out one creature instead wound up being an area destruction effect. The whole party was wiped from existence. As was Atlantis, and so was nearby Aquamundo. It was like someone used a nuke. Even the water of the ocean was getting consumed.

Uhhhh... third time's the charm? This time, I thought ahead. Instead of sending angels, or doing overkill effects, I sent an avatar, a being that had pledged to help. I initially thought of sending some sort of summoner to use some kind of anti-death spirit. But more than the death of free will, someone like J. K. Rowling freaks me out. I'm not touching that franchise with a ten-foot pole. I instead decided to send something I had created before humans, something that I had hoped never to see again. Drudges.

Drudges are a first attempt at creation of life. Coincidentally, they are also humanity's first attempt, though humans have yet to learn to hate them. You would call them robots. They neither love nor fear, nor have any will of their own. Humans tried to fix this, but wound up either with robots following Laws of Robotics, or evil robots. They couldn't seem to get this right either. I hated drudges, for the same reason I hated mindless worshipers. I'd rather have someone who loves or hates me, than who feels lukewarm. Still, for this purpose, they were the ones I could send.

64756D6D79 as an avatar basically had to be ordered to do anything, but was tough

enough to take on a dragon. It had no magic, but then, it didn't need it. It was immune to acid. It was immune to flesh-rotting. It was immune to death effects, since it didn't have a body that could be considered living under the normal definition. And while its body could be cut, it had segmented limbs that reattached, and no real nerve endings. And drudges were very strong. It kinda ripped the dragon apart, and left a mass of bones and guts behind. However, because none of Ambrosia's party would have been happy watching robot on dragon violence, all of this happened "off-screen" (between moments). To their understanding, they simply surfaced and rather than seeing a zombie dragon, they would have seen a corpse. The robot even convinced the dragon to finally give up its dragon soul to the land. So, by the time they came, they did not even see a corpse, but rather a verdant shore with a large hill in the spot where the dragon had been.

YAZIM JIANNE

Having set aside the Meteor spell, along with several lower-tier spells which I could use more often, I had ultimately dispensed with the molebear blocking my path. I had just departed from a side tunnel, when I noticed a fairly large party of adventurers who had yet to see me. These people must not be allowed to discover what I was doing. I would have to blast them, but first, in order not to miss... I muttered under my breath the words, "ザ•ワルド " words roughly associated with the halting of time. While a simple spell in theory, since there are no complicated gestures or anything, about one person in a thousand would actually understand how to cast it, even among sorcerers.

Using sorcery is unlike thaumaturgy in a key way. A wonder-worker, strictly speaking, does not need to understand the miracles they perform. They simply are more effective this way, because the thaumaturgy doesn't risk violating physics. Remember the more fantastic the effect, the more effort it involves to succeed. Unlike a wonder-worker, sorcerers need to understand what they are doing. This is precisely why attempting to stop time, or for that matter, traveling forwards or backwards through it is so dangerous.

There are two major theories of what happens when time is stopped, neither of which are right. The first is that the effect accelerates the body to the point where matter around the caster appears to be standing still. The second involves slowing down the movement of all matter. Both of these ideas are dead wrong: the first would move the body at such a speed that this body would vibrate apart, causing disintegration; the second would take unbelievable amount of power, so it usually fails. If it somehow *could* draw that amount of mystic power, it would end the universe by causing Absolute Zero. These theories are based on a faulty notion that the energy/entropy in the universe, temperature, and rate of motion are all linked to time. In actual fact, time is simply causality. All that really changes is that this moment is stopped; because of this, time spells are far easier to cast than would originally be believed.

A grey wave extended in an expanding sphere around me, cloaking the area in a sort of barrier against events. This is not to say nothing can be changed, rather, I alone would be the only thing in color. I could still move and breathe, and any objects I touched would move again. Using physical attacks would hurt the target, but end the effect for them. I'd have to make whatever attack count the first time, because a spell like this wasn't much for second chances, short of turning back time. There was a limited radius, since I couldn't exactly cover the Earth in this effect. And since we were in a tunnel underground, my options were rather limited. I pulled out some knives and took aim at the girl who had blue hair.

AMBROSIA

I felt weird for a second, or about 9 seconds to be exact. Time had stopped. The Crest of Chronos has suddenly started glowing. I was just in time to see a wizard tossing around knives at me, so I stepped out of the way. His hair was black with touches of white, and he wore the clothing of a sorcerer. The knives embedded themselves in the rock walls behind me. The knives were made from cheap steel, so some of them broke from the impact. The wizard looked visibly shocked, "You... you can move?!?" I was new to using time powers, so I probably could only make a movement like that for about 2 seconds every so often, even though I could still talk. As he continued to talk to me though, gradually this length seemed longer, until finally I could move somewhat freely.

“Why shouldn't I be able to move...?” I asked before glancing around. Everything besides us was still and a strange hue of grey. The others of my group were completely still, as was a nearby bat in mid-flight, and another hanging from a stalactite. There was also a drop of water hanging in midair, I grabbed it out of the air and drank it. It was wet, but kinda had a limestone taste to it. It was a bit too minerally for my taste.

I asked, “So, time has stopped, huh?” He nodded. I tried touching my friends, but couldn't get them to respond. He looked surprised but after looking at what I did, he mumbled, “Ah I see, a tighter primary temporal layer...” Finally, since nothing I did could unfreeze anyone, I just gave Nevras a big kiss, since nothing I did would obviously have any consequences. “He'll be able to feel that when time starts again,” he said (causing me to blush), “Will I need to fight you? I don't want anyone finding out what I'm doing.” I shrugged, “Honestly, I don't know or care who you are or what you're doing. My group is trying to get the Crests of the Oracles.” He gasped, “You might be a threat to me. I cannot allow an Oracle to Tao to threaten my plans. What is your name, woman?”

Hmmm, it probably wasn't wise to tell my name here, but I don't tend to care about that. I told him anyway. “My name,” I paused for effect, “is Ambrosia Brahman. What's yours?” There was something very odd about this person. I got a mad scientist vibe, like he was going to just start cackling while boasting to me of his plans. Sure enough. “You'd like to know about me, now wouldn't you? You'd like to know that I am Yazim Jianne, the sorcerer who will summon the dread demon Belial to give my beloved a new body. You'd like to know that, wouldn't you? But I won't tell you, I'll never tell you!” He continued ranting, and telling me increasingly personal details about his wife, his past, and several things about his sex life that were honestly too kinky to share.

Finally, I cut him off, “Uhhh, you kinda did tell me.” His crazed nature and paranoia suddenly turned into garden variety shame, as he realized he'd been blabbing all sorts of personal issues and many of his plans for quite some time. I had no idea that he had a plan J-4 that involved teleporting away in the event that he managed to meet the Oracle of Tao (he'd apparently dismissed this as an impossibility, yet planned for it anyway) and told his plans to them. “Well,” I said, “I'm not gonna fight you, if you're not gonna attack me. Here's your stuff.” I slid back his knives, as he gulped, nodded, and left the area.

As he left, the time stop effect suddenly caved in. His body turned into particles of light, and scattered to reform elsewhere, while the grey sphere started pulling in, with a slight recoil. The bat in flight wobbled slightly, as if wondering what it had been doing. The nearby stalactite dripped another drop. And Nevras asked, “Why can't I hear anything? And why does my mouth feel so nice?” Okay, so maybe I kissed a little hard. “Shut up,” I said. Not that he heard me for a while.

ZOE

I spent much of my time looking at underground life with interest, as much of my life had been involved in the studies of the Druids, and I had learned to revere places like forests and meadows. I had been in a cave before, obviously, since I grew up wandering the natural world, but I was always fascinated by how diverse caves were. Some were covered in lava, others in sand, some were cold, and still others were filled with life.

There was something weird about this one though. As I was trained as a Druid, I have something called Nature Sense which is the ability to feel subtle things about the surroundings. Right now, I could tell that the bioluminescent mushrooms which had been feeding off waste had slightly stunted here. They were ten or twenty minutes behind in their growth compared with those around them. This is not to say they looked withered, but more like somehow that time hadn't existed. Very strange...

We walked ahead. A dwarf woman up ahead looked depressed, and more than slightly listless. I wanted to help. Wasn't there a dwarf man who wanted to see his wife?

YAZIM JIANNE

I arrived at the doorstep of one of my lairs a second later. Teleportation, strictly speaking, was not instant travel. They tried “instant travel” at one point during Earth's history, it wound up being like a facsimile machine. The person would enter, have everything about them scanned, be cloned on the other side, and the current side would destroy the person. All it took was a few network errors resulting in “corrupted” scans,

creating puddles of mush or amnesiacs to discard the technology. This was magic, not technology, and much more reliable. I had also learned the spell Gate, which opened a window to another place in time/space, allowing me to go anywhere including other times or dimensions, but it was much more taxing. This was a simple transmutation from solid matter to a tight ball of light. I could travel anywhere in this universe at light speed. If this were the original Earth, this wouldn't have taken even a second, but this New Earth was actually much larger. It actually took quite a few seconds to get to this remote location. Not that I could enter directly, anyway. I could not teleport into any space that was solid and did not reflect light, and this castle... well, it was made from a mineral that refracted light to an extent that it appeared black. It was effective against beam magic, and it was specifically made so that others could not drop in uninvited.

Those people would surely ruin my plans. I had not released that woman Ambrosia because of mercy or since she vaguely reminded me of my time with my wife. I had made a tactical retreat. I would amend my plans to orchestrate that group's downfall.

Soon...

I would show all of them that I was a genius. They scoffed at my work. “Scoff scoff,” they had said. But they would see. In time.

ELIAS

The process of distilling out Jade and Ruby Elixir with the addition of Level Root as a powdered ingredient is actually the easy part. Honestly, if this were all there was to it, I would have finished the process within a day and a half. I managed a great deal of it while Aqorm was talking to me. I spent another two and a half days, straining the substance through smaller and smaller filters, until there were no impurities.

Aqorm. I sighed. There's no helping it. I cannot help but miss her, but the task that I was about to perform would make me more useful to the group. It didn't seem to matter to them, but perhaps it mattered to me. I would need some time to catch up to the others.

From this point on, I shall make a log, and you, the future readers of my work will bear witness to all that has transpired. I will not share these results with the others, aside from possibly Aqorm. You understand. Ambrosia had a special destiny, and she would not wish to see herself as a mere factor in my logs. Aqorm, she would accept such an account, as she understands my goals.

As I say, the part I performed earlier was the easy part. Most books on alchemy dutifully copy these steps to any would-be master alchemist. However, most of them find after wasting most of their resources, that there is an extra step. Writers of such books fall under two categories: professional copy-editors and professional alchemists. The copy-editors grab all the books they can, and run it through the xerography process, creating fast updates to keep the world's many books from going out of print. This isn't a problem with books made from First Trees, their berries become ink and their branches become paper, making books that last forever. But everything else must at some point either be replicated by hand, dry-written by a thaumaturgy expert, pounded on a page by a printing press, or dry-written using alchemic processes. Unlike the so-called “dry-writing” of 20th and 21st century, these versions used no resources, they simply zapped the page heat and electrostatic charge. Any decent wonder-worker could work a xerography session. A lousy attempt, however, might wind up burning pages.

But I digress. The point is, aside from their ability to copy pages by either magic or alchemy, they typically knew very little of either, having skill mainly at copying the works of others. And make no mistake, they were good at that, but they had little understanding of the larger theories of alchemy in many cases.

On the other hand, professional alchemists typically reproduced their own paper, and knew a great deal about how such things worked. So much, in fact, that this was precisely the problem. They wanted to keep their trade secrets to themselves. It was only through reading a number of supplementary resources that I learned of the Reverse Inversion Method of Matter Subjugation, and its role in creating a working Philosopher's Stone. To speak bluntly, this was high-level processing. It was the reason most alchemists had some magical ability. This process could best be compared to the complexity of atomic fusion, only for magic. I'm not sure that I can explain the process, but I shall certainly try.

Hmmm, perhaps now would be a good time to explain how alchemy works, and how it differs from magic. Alright, let's start with a history lesson. Long ago, there were two major schools of alchemy, Eastern and Western Alchemy. It's much more complicated than this, but let's start with that. Western Alchemy focused on the four elements and aether, and the use of chemistry to turn lead into gold, along with making the universal solvent. Eastern alchemy had five elements, focused on trying to turn cinnabar into gold, and was more concerned with immortality. On the surface, these seem much the same, but Eastern Alchemy was also tied into Taoist mysticism. When technology supplanted the arcane, these alchemy secrets were preserved while ultimately Western Alchemy was turned into chemistry. At around the start of the New Earth, very little information about technology could be found, and what could be found was eventually suppressed by the Council for prevention of further wars. As a result, most practical science, with the exception of chemistry, was stuck just prior to the first Industrial Revolution, roughly about 1720 or so. There were crank operated devices, but for the most part electricity was difficult to harness. On the other hand, alchemists quickly mastered the production of cement, various acids and bases, and even the use of special battery cells for holding energy from various sources.

Of course, having no conventional sources of the aforementioned energy, they had to turn to unconventional ones. Alchemy, as it is known today, is divided into four subsets: Crafting, Synthesis, Outer Alchemy, and Inner Alchemy. Somewhere in the overlap between Outer and Inner Alchemy there is the Decomposition technique which breaks solid matter down into energy, and also the Extraction technique. I currently have no means available to do the former (it usually requires a catalyst), so let's discuss what exactly Extraction is. Any alchemist worth his salt has at least two means of generating energy, with up to five total: using the elements whether four or five (or some other model), using one's own body's energy as fuel, using batteries that stored energy from another source, using a catalyst, or through Extraction. So what, you ask, is Extraction?

This may take awhile. Everything in nature, has energy with regard to its existence. Living things like trees and people have jiva, nonliving things have ajiva. The average alchemist can extract this being into a flame-like energy known as *anima*, or *animus*, ummm, let's call it anima. Extraction withers what it just touched to draw anima out, which is why it is usually used on soil. Still, the soil can't grow anything until it renews itself. This anima energy can then be used for Elemental Synthesis, for Decomposition, to power basic Synthesis, for Transmutation, and so on.

All of those things are Outer Alchemy. Inner Alchemy, on the other had, was more akin to mind-over-matter techniques. Its source was usually the body itself, and it used its power to energize the body in various ways. Releasing static electricity, detoxification, fusing rock or metal to harden the body, regeneration, all of these were Inner Alchemy. The goal of Outer Alchemy is to get the body to regenerate so the body is immortal.

As for magic, well... Runes are individual marks, which govern the formation of matter and energy. They allow magic to operate, but more than that, they alter how things function on an atomic level. Now, the problem of all of this is that, typically magic doesn't *create* matter, but rather works with energy. Plenty of people could use runes to make stuff, but only angels, exorcists, and innkeepers (don't ask) have ever been able to use runes to truly create something independent of themselves, using either the Forging of Objects or the Forging of Heart. The stage of creation above this was the Forging of All Things, which to my knowledge had only been done by God. Supposedly, there was one layer of creation beyond even that, the so-called True Creation, but that was just a legend. Most people won't understand the distinction, except to say that the quality of Original Intent is higher, as the higher up, the more real things got, and the more an object has its own nature. By the time you got to the Forging of All Things, matter had exactly the same Original Intent as something that had always existed.

For anything else, all other rune creation had the same drawbacks of enchantment, that of locking up mystic power. To avoid this problem, most runes are used to alter matter instead. So the first mistake is that people seeking to create a stone resort to enchanting, when they actually need to be using runes in a sound manner to alter matter into new matter. After all, “matter can neither be created nor destroyed,” as per the Law

of Conservation of Mass. Matter can only be transformed, with alchemy or runes.

I believe at some point Synthesis has been mentioned, and how it typically produces faulty materials. This is not always the case. You see, typically Synthesis works to create materials from scraps by formula. However, the Reverse Inversion Method of Matter Subjugation is a high-level brand of Synthesis using a few key differences, mainly the bonding of free matter with an excess of energy to an already existing material. In essence, while normal Synthesis fell apart because the objects had no Original Intent, this drew some from previously existing materials, cobbling together something from a composite of other resources. That is, rather than trying to build a crappy product from a list of ingredients, I was redirecting a freakish amount of energy to remake raw materials into finished matter. I'm told this is how a food athanor produces real food, and not tasteless garbage, but to be fair, it only has a few recipes.

Even though it wasn't really my energy going into this Stone, I clasped my hands, straining from the effort. I chose to use a circle to draw in elements, along with several batteries that I had made from extracting along the way. I had been careful to do so sparingly, as I had heard of many greedy alchemists that nearly made wastelands as a result of rampant use of alchemy in this way.

I unclasped my hands at last, having finished the current process, bringing the total number of days spent to five. The Philosopher's Stone was now totally solid, and unlike other methods employed by misled alchemists, it had properly solidified rather than simply hardening from evaporation of all moisture. Those stones typically shattered when exposed to air. I pulled the mass from the beaker. It was tempting to believe myself done on the fifth day, but I knew better. As exhausted as I was from lack of sleep, there was a reason this took a week. It was modeled after the Creation itself. God would permit Philosopher's Stones to be made, only by following proper procedure. If I did not, the Stone would explode within the day, and I'm not talking about a puny meth lab explosion. The built up array of runes contained enough energy to completely obliterate a 5000 mile radius. But let's not focus on failure, okay?

For the fifth, and much of the sixth day, I had to enchant the Philosopher's Stone, but not just any enchantment. The process was called Life Giving, a process similar to the magic ritual known as Forging of Objects, and was a key part of many methods of golem production. It offered the user's own lifespan as collateral, allowing what was created to “live” for the user's lifespan in return for cutting their own shorter. The Philosopher's Stone could then be used to extend that life back through using brewed elixirs, but if they were already old when they tried, cutting lifespan meant the process would be lethal, and the Stone would turn to dust. I still had my life ahead of me, but I felt like I was going to die from exhaustion after several straight days of strenuous work.

At last, the process completed. The stone glowed in its core a faint green at steady rhythm while the stone itself turned a deep purple. The crystal was as clear as water, allowing one to see the rune in the core. It was a teardrop crystal roughly the size of a large cobblestone, but it weighed about as much as a pebble. My job wasn't over yet, but now was the easy part. I had to rest, as did the stone within its container. For the rest of today until tomorrow. This is why it took seven days.

I dreamed a very strange dream. I was in the Great Library. I was just about to settle in for a day of reading, when I noticed this was a dream... I awoke. After I woke up, I went to the library to read. I was just about to settle in for a day of reading, when I noticed this was a dream... I awoke. I was just about to settle in for a day of reading, when I noticed this was a dream... I awoke.

The Stone glowed, and my eyes fluttered open after a substantial amount of rest. I had definitely recovered, but I had a roaring headache from my dream. I donned my diving suit and made my way toward the rest of my group, a week later than them.

NEVRAS

Ambrosia and the others continued through the cave. The cave started out slimy, and transitioned to a dry cave with jagged rocks. There were mushrooms littered all around the moister portions, and some of these were huge, creating actual obstacles. Somehow or other, we managed, and we found ourselves in the section with the dwarf woman.

“Hi there,” I said. She was singing some sort of work song, until she turned around and noticed us. She gave a little gasp, and hid her body behind a rock.

Dwarf men and women are known for extreme sexual dimorphism. Besides the rather obvious difference of one having breasts and the other having long beards, their heights and muscle mass are different. Dwarf men are around three feet and built like a barrel, while dwarf women are closer to 4'9” and petite. I suppose a comparison could be made between a German super-soldier and a German woman in a *dirndl*. Yet both dwarf men and dwarf women were equally strong, the women just didn't build muscle mass. And by strong, I mean that dwarves were able to punch through rock wall with just their fists.

And yet, dwarves were shy. Staying underground does have an effect on interpersonal skills, since the only contact they usually get is maybe meeting when their tunnels cross. They have a lot of festivals, which usually wind up just being pretexts to consume large qualities of beer. But occasionally, such a thing as conversation happens.

She mumbled and fidgeted, “H-hi...” Ambrosia asked her, “You wouldn't happen to be looking for another dwarf, would you?” Her look of surprise mixed with a slight blush. “You...” she paused, “you met him?” I nodded, then spent the next half-hour explaining how the dwarf was on the other side of the cave, but the path itself led straight through the water. I asked, “Would you like to take one of our diving suits?” She shook her head pointing to her petite frame that wouldn't fit properly. She asked me instead to elaborate on all the details I had seen concerning the rock walls. I hadn't noticed it before, but come to think of it, even the open portion where we fought the dragon did seem to have a cave far above us acting as a sort of ceiling in places. Picking up her pickaxe, she expertly cleared away the rocks in her way. I noticed how she seemed to have a lot more energy to her swings than the other dwarf had about building a railroad. In a few minutes, she had managed to build a tunnel, and I no longer saw her.

We continued on. The cave that had been filled with mushrooms and mycozoe near the edge of the water was starting to feel increasingly cold the closer we came to the opening of the cave. We stepped out into the open snow. The area was coated with permafrost, broken occasionally by alpine forests or mountain ranges, yet the snow and ice never receded until the shore. There were three large structures nearby: to the southeast was a castle that I never wanted to enter if I could help, let's call this the Castle of Fear; the direct south had a mansion surrounded by trees which Aqorm pointed out was her own; and the western coast had the thriving walled city of Kushiyama.

CHAPTER 16

In which Ambrosia meets Jesus and stuff from Cthulhu Mythos the same day.

AMBROSIA

We visited Aqorm's mansion first. As Elias wasn't here, it was a rather quick trip, through the libraries, for a quick meal provided by their private chef, and to meet her parents, Melissa and Richard Flowless. When Elias came later, we revisited this place and had a proper tour, but for the sake of brevity, let's not discuss the eight days we spent hanging around. She played the 1812 Overture on her piano, as we looked at old pictures of her and her house. She was an ugly kid. For some reason, they had been living in a shabby one-room house until recently, and I got the impression she was happier with this cozy house than in this big mansion. For the song's finale, she had pulled out small live cannons and was firing it at the wall. Her mother Melissa called from the other room, “**Aqorm**! Stop firing cannons in the house!” I missed my parents' scolding.

After saving our journey, we explored a bit to the south of the mansion, and found a pass through the mountainside. The pass however was guarded by a rather large Elder Formless. I will not attempt to describe its awe-inspiring form, so great and terrible was this thing. The closest description would be to say that it is a rather large eye with tentacles extending from it, but beyond that my brain begins to shut down in horror of having to look at it long enough to describe physical features. “Oh no,” Azrael said, having suddenly gained the ability to speak after a short period of shock. “That's Cyäegha, an Elder Formless! We'd be lucky to even seal it away, much less kill it. We

should really run away now...” So saying, she seemed less likely to run away and more at ease with simply staring in admiration of its monstrous form. Obviously, she had read literature about this thing and was fascinated by it. “Ahem,” she repeated, “we should run now... but...” She showed little sign of following through. And the rest of us were paralyzed by fear.

My knife, being formed of First Material, glowed in response to the thing which we will not mention. The others fired magic at it and tried ranged attacks and techniques, but nothing happened. No, it wasn't like it was thick-skinned and it did little damage. And it wasn't like it hit a magical shield either, it was more like it hit a black hole, sucking whatever energy or matter entered and leaving nothing behind. The others couldn't attack, so I had no choice, I had to attack. I charged forward , slashing away at whatever sort of shield might be there. I didn't feel anything get cut, it was more like somehow or other I had been allowed to move closer. I stabbed Cyäegha 's eye, and it screamed in pain.

AZRAEL

There's something that everyone should know about the Elder Formless. Short of God being able to declare them false (truth be told, they never existed in the first place, but the human mind is able to conjure up false gods from their fears), they don't properly die. If someone manages to hurt them badly enough, they flee back to the realm where they originally came. And for many of them, even destroying their physical body is not enough, they just respawn instantly. For nearly any weapon aside from First Material (weapon is used loosely, as evidenced by First Milk being thrown against Tràntor, the Dollmaster), they are seldom hurt badly enough to even make them consider flight. The standard procedure is to initiate a seal using high-level Exorcism, and then attempt to kill their physical form. Somehow. Possibly because of the First Material, Ambrosia was able to enter without being voided from existence. But after being stabbed by its weakness, it fought back. This is always a risk involved, even when using weapons loathsome to a being. Bloodied from being stabbed in the eye, it glanced around, and saw Aqorm. All of a sudden, she was turned into dust. It next used some sort of high level elemental ability to blast Nevras, killing him on impact. Ambrosia screamed, “Nevras! You killed him, you bastard!” She went into a berserk frenzy, slashing away at the Being, but for some reason, despite having Ambrosia in its sight, it wouldn't make eye contact. It kept looking away.

Before this thing doomed the rest of us, I pulled out my bell. As I have said before, I used an incredible amount of time and effort making this bell. It can destroy **anything**, Elder Formless, zombies, Monsters, demons, and all types of living creatures provided they are in range of the sound. Maybe not God, but just short of that.

I had no time to ring it, however, before Cyäegha summoned the Nagäae, a hoard of quivering loathsome beings. This minions grasped Zoe with their tongues, and then they had their way with her. She was dead to me. It was just me and Ambrosia left, so I swung the bell, dipping it slightly, then raising it and snapping my wrist forward. The bell gave a low bass tone, and then everything changed.

I started bleeding. I was fainting fast, but I held on until the bell finished its ring. Around me, the air grew like darkness beyond blackest pitch, deeper than the deepest night. It spread outward like water rising from the depths. It started to affect things not in the order of who heard it, but in terms of their condition. It started with the freshly summoned Nagäae, turning them into a horrid mass of shadow, ichor, and organs. Zoe's body began to wither until it resembled centuries of rot, until finally becoming nothing. Then, the sound affected Cyäegha. The large eye was simply swept away like a strong wind disturbing a reflection on the water, it gave no sign to its passing. I was now bleeding profusely, and struggling to stand upright, I tried to hold back the bell before its power touched Ambrosia but it could not be taken back. It touched Ambrosia, and I saw too much. Then I saw no more, as everything turned to white.

AMBROSIA

God obviously reset our reality, and it was a good thing too. I often have memories of events before the reset, yet I am unsure how much the others know when things revert. I've never asked. In any case, I am grateful that not all was remembered, as I don't want to think about what might happen to a living human who hears the Bell. I am infinitely

thankful for that. I had heard tales of those who had encountered Elder Formless and become their playthings. The endless torture as the claws or tentacles or other appendages inserted themselves into the brain or eyes or... other orifices, filling the person with endless surreal images of the universe come apart, of space and time skewed in a way that is too terrible to depict in words. The sending to oblivion caused by the Bell, this is a mercy. I have no earthly idea what exactly it is that such people see, only to conclude that it is better to be eaten first. The lifeless husks, devoid of worth, happiness, self-will meander through life only awaiting death after such an encounter. I was spared something worse than death today.

Having learned my lesson about dealing with creatures of incredible power without extensive training, we made our way instead to Kushiyama. We saw quite a few people enter from all modes of transport in hot air balloons, pedal submarines, and numerous strange creatures making their way to the city. Being a port town of enormous size with loads and loads of exotic goods made it a real destination.

It is said that human beings alter their environment. It was never more true than in the town of Kushiyama. The land on the outskirts was frozen wastes, yet somehow the area immediately around had a small patch of fertile land which was used for farming and forestry. When we entered the town, despite the outside territory being beastly cold, the weather was far more like spring.

Kushiyama, unlike many areas we had visited, could no longer be called a town. It was a proper city, and had everything from a shopping area, to a major bank, to a public library, to a government center. As the place was huge, we decided to take a break and rest at the inn until Elias returned.

I checked the bank out while we waited since we needed money for shopping. As a result of blackmailing the king of Phoenix, we now had a healthy stock of money in this bank. Aside from our rather large amount of pocket money from creature slaying, we had been given 50 million Gold. So we talked to the head clerk at the bank to claim it.

The building had a sort of noirish feel to it. The shabby old stone was blackened by coal and cigarette smoke, not that anyone smoked nowadays. Or burned coal. I half expected some dame in a pencil skirt to walk in. The head clerk sat in a desk in the center of the room, there was no vault in this bank, but in a world where magic converted physical money into numerical runes and stored all of it in a tiny red chest, I can't say I was surprised. The back section had a long counter where the other bank workers stood.

She asked, “What can I do for you today? I can set up multiple accounts for you, I can handle your loans, I can issue checks for large sums, and you can buy a house if you want.” Honestly, the last one sounded interesting, yet I wanted to ask something first. I looked at the multiple file cabinets in the back of the building. “Excuse me,” I asked, “but what exactly are those back there?” She turned around and glanced, “Oh, those? Multiple accounts, as I have said. We issue one main account which has no limit and collects interest, in addition to up to seven safe deposit boxes. They hold more than you might think.” She wasn't kidding. She opened one up and emptied it out, the was a piano, a small pile of Gold, precious gems, and some paintings. I nodded, “Sign me up! Well, as long as there isn't any subscription fee.” She looked at me like I was speaking a foreign language. Oh, right. People didn't do subscriptions anymore. She shook her head, “To perform this service, we will require 10,000 Gold from you beforehand. Using our long-term interest 30% of that will be returned to you immediately, then 1% a year over the next 70 years, non-inheritable.” Sounds like they'd get back my money quick then. I set it up, without asking the others, and our on-hand money returned to about 400 Gold. It was totally worth it though! “Tell me about the loans,” I said next, wanting to get some quick cash. She explained, “Oh no, you misunderstand. We don't do loans at this place or any bank. In the past, the system was sometimes based on banks printing money whenever people took out loans. You can imagine how that goes. They get their money, but it's with interest, and then they are even worse off than before. This is poor customer service anyway, even before the fact that it's illegal by order of the Council. No, what we do is take claims of people who have been hit by loan sharks, and help them get their money back, and arrest the guy.”

I paused knowing what I was going to do was a huge purchase, “I would like to know about houses you have for sale.” She nodded once again, walking to a whiteboard. The head clerk was substantially shorter than her coworkers. It wasn't evident while she had been sitting down, but while in front of the board she had to reach quite a bit. She wrote out the prices, explaining as she went, “We have two categories, portable housing and brick-and-mortar. Our portable housing is simply an upgrade to the party tent you had before, with the structure contained inside of the dimensional space of the tent. At the bottom tier, we have a basic portable house, with all the essentials, for a low low price of 5 million Gold. You can get a portable mansion for 20 million, and portable town for 50 million. Building a house from wood or stone, raises the price by about fifty times, so the cheapest house that we can build is...” I interrupted, “I'll take it! I mean, not the brick and mortar house, I've got 50 million in the bank, correct?” She nodded, but then frowned. “After deducting most of the money in your account, you will only have 4500 Gold, after the return from opening multiple accounts. While that money will eventually be returned, we won't... I mean... you won't be able to collect much interest on that amount...” But I smiled, “It's okay, we know you're not in banking for purely altruistic reasons. I'll probably put that money back in the next time we sell some good items.”

We exited the bank, and tried the party tent out. From what the banker had explained, the tent upgrade did not take up any more space. I had to see this for myself. I opened up the tent, but it looked the same outside, an old ragged scuffed-up tent. I went inside, telling Nevras, “stay outside and guard the tent.” Inside, there was a small town, with stone buildings, a yellow brick path (I'm told this is not a matter of painting bricks yellow, but a different lime content) with grass and hedges at the edge of the trail. The town had maybe four houses, and it was obvious that it was designed to be purchased as an addition to the house and mansion purchased earlier, as these were included. It also had an armor shop, an item shop, and a few townspeople walking about in this town. In the center of the town was a save point. I wasn't going to ask or even think about how these people got here. The entire idea was likely to give me nightmares.

The house had a small fire pit with a cauldron hanging from a stand, a crude outhouse insert in the right corner, a small pool of water for bathing, a table with a few books, a bed with no frame, and a few dishes. There was a bowl containing five loaves of bread and two fish (I know from my fishing excursions, this is a Damascus Barbel), so we had a meal. There was a lot left over though. The floor of the building was a dirt floor, except near the pool, where the water was contained with a stone framing.

The mansion, by contrast, was a proper house, with smoothed cobblestone flooring, finely carved stone walls, carpeting, a stove, a real bed, a bookcase, a weapon case, a common table for eating, an extended bedroom with added space for makeshift bedding, and some side rooms complete with wall-to-wall carpeting. There appeared to be little in the way of runes or alchemy, but it looked like it was open for all kinds of expansion. The shops were stocked with mostly what we had seen elsewhere, but the item shop did have a nice selection of crafted potions, and the weapon shop also sold bombs and a wide variety of specialty arrows. Not that we could afford those right now. I was just about to leave when I lost my balance, as everything around outside shook. An earthquake?

NEVRAS

I tried to stop them, honest. But you can't expect me to hold off ten city guards with the rest of the group inside a tent. Not without getting us in a lot more trouble. You see, camping inside a major city is kind of illegal, and while they let me off with a warning because I claimed I didn't mean to, they still insisted on collapsing the tent and moving it outside the town gates. I hope Ambrosia and the others were okay.

After a disgruntled and confused group exited the tent, we decided to explore more of the town. Kushiyama, not the party town. They had had enough of a shaking tent. We had entered a public square where the indoor shops gave way to stands, but they started singing show tunes from Oliver Twist, so we just left. I bought Ambrosia and myself a new cellphone on the way out, this one used Heart Sense system to communicate between people. Unlike runes, which only worked in areas where magic was, Heart Sense worked on the power of human connection, meaning as long as you were thinking of the

other person, you could contact someone anywhere.

We came to an area near the church. Near the steps of the church, the pavement had a funny circular pattern that didn't look like the walkway around it. The church itself was apparently fairly normal, being part of the Revival Church movement that had sprang up after the New Earth. They didn't really believe in many of Jesus's classical teachings, since a complete Bible was basically impossible to find now. The one the priest was reading from was tattered and had most of its pages missing. Normally, such a Bible would be burned, but they couldn't afford to reprint since the only other text besides such books was online, and people had largely lost internet technology when culture switched from technology to runes and alchemy. The Church, such as it was, appeared to emphasize three things: the existence of a Savior, the Resurrection and Eternal Life, and Grace. They had little concept of religious laws, nor much of history, and most of the early letters of the church were gone. The things from before had passed away. Inside the church, however, everyone from demons to angels, to elves, to even robots attended. The priest and nuns were Blessed, so they had little reason not to welcome everyone.

Outside the church, I saw the man himself, Jesus Christ. I could tell from the whole long hair thing, along with his pierced up hands. After the Resurrection, a lot of other stuff happened. Jesus came to preach to all the world, though he only became noticeable after the State fell and the Earth was reformed. And indeed, many people did believe. But the Council decided that a single religion governing the entire world would be greatly akin to the State, which they opposed, so they allowed that each town could build whatever temples it wanted, but if Jesus was to preach to people, he was allowed to do so in only one town. The Council was not evil, they were not against God, but they also had no desire to see more expansive regimes, good or not, to crop out in the world. Since the last time someone had tried to kill Jesus, a worldwide religion spread, they just let him do his thing, and his followers could go anywhere or build churches, but he was confined to Kushiyama for as long as he lived. He had been here awhile, from what I'd heard. The Council had been set up in 5116 AD, just after the Great Phoenix War had ended, and it was now the middle of 7076 AD. Wait, shouldn't it be 7077? Something was... I forgot what I was talking about. Anyway. Most of what the Revival Church used as scripture was not in fact from their cobbled together Bible but from Jesus's direct teachings. And he made sure they understood when they were becoming too much like the Pharisees. Currently though, he was not teaching, he was feeding Followers.

Followers of the Way, they were originally called. But this term became confusing, since there were not only Revival Church, but also Messianic Jews, and Taoists (who also called their path the Way). Ultimately, though, these weren't the followers we saw inside the church. To be blunt, they were basically a type of vampires. There were not the typical vampires, who feared the light of the sun, were averse to holy symbols, disliked garlic, and had a craving for blood. And then there were the Followers, who never craved anything including food, loved garlic, attended church and wore crosses as sign of commitment to Christ, and love to sunbathe. They were still pale and still had sharp fangs, but you could typically tell the difference in behavior.

There were some new people who had as of yet not become Followers. Jesus told them, “Truly, truly, I tell you, he who believes has eternal life. I am the Bread of Life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, yet they died. This is the Bread that comes down from Heaven, so that anyone may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from Heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And this bread, which I will give for the life of the world, is My flesh. Truly, truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh and drink the blood of the Son of Man, you have no life in you. Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up. For My flesh is real food, and My blood is real drink.” At this, these men and women, and even small children, began to bite him, sucking his blood.

Ambrosia and I were shocked. “Should... we stop this? It looks wrong.” Jesus shook his head, “I allow it. For by this sign will it be known that all who believe in me shall not die, but have eternal life.” Ambrosia sighed. This was creepy. I am told that after becoming immortal, many of these led highly productive lives. They healed the sick and drove out evil spirits using the power he had blessed them with. They worked hard at

their job, they gave their money to charity, and tended to operate in committed families for as long as they lived, which was pretty much forever unless killed. And even then, they probably had access to the Afterlife. Lucky bastards. I felt a little sad for the children though, they would be stuck at their age.

Jesus talked with us of his life, Passion, and death. Of his rising to life again. It all seemed so matter of fact. “I'm not sure I agree with this,” Ambrosia said, “I mean, I know God, but this is too much.” He shrugged, “No worries,” he said, “not everyone will accept my message. But I came to save all sinners.” Ambrosia shook her head, “No, your message is fine, I mean the whole... blood-sucking thing.” Jesus nodded, “No worries. It is not mandatory. Those people chose to become like this. And if later they want to return, I can heal them. It is up to them.” Jesus was kind of... mellow. I could honestly see him surfing, and he totally had the hair for it. Even around here, where the waters were cold. He could likely stand up to injustice, but his Followers were already doing a tremendous amount of good, despite the fact that about 25% of the population were vampires, only 5% were Followers, and the city was greatly misruled by the corrupt, brutal, and noticeably expansionist King Yama.

After learning much from him about Love, Grace, and Sacrifice, we continued on our way. Ultimately, we did not become followers (lowercase!) but Ambrosia seemed to have mellowed out with the realization that her flaws were to a large extent forgiven of her. We had a mission to do, though, and could not stay in this town forever. We explored the town some more, from the historical museums to the arcades filled with games to wandering around gardens and graveyards. The city was fairly huge, and it was much more than we could see in one day.

We went to the library and read two children's stories while waiting for Elias. We needed to stall somehow, after all. Ambrosia picked up a book with a cute puppy on the front called *The Dog Who Cried Woof.* She read, «Long ago, animals all had the power to speak. But, they could only speak the truth. One day, a certain dog, named Ebon Wolf, discovered how to lie. He always told the townsfolk that there was a wolf in town. Because people at that time believed animals could not lie, they always came when Ebon called. As time went on, people lost faith in the words of the little doggie, and as more and more creatures began to lie, the humans in this land stopped listening to them. Gradually, after being ignored, animals became more timid and less able to enunciate clearly, until finally, dogs were limited to saying 'woof' all the time.» Next, was the 4018 bestseller, *Crocodile Tears*. It even won the Newberry! It was all about this crocodile whining about how other animals rejected it, then eating them when the tried to cheer it up. A familiar voice behind us spoke up, “Those are terrible books!” Aqorm turned around. “Elias!” And she hugged and kissed him.

Elias told us, “I'll find you a real story.” After a bit of searching, he pulled out a book with the title, *The Story of the First Oracle*. « Reality is but a dream, dreams are but images... Many years ago, there came upon the Earth like it is said will come again in great time of need, an Oracle was born. These were dangerous times, as a demon named Belial threatened the land. Visiting the ancient wise, the Oracle learned the power of the Crests, and set out to banish Belial from the lands. But suddenly, the Oracle instead vanished from the Earth. It required two angels to split the demon into parts, and seal it into an urn. Belial awaits the hand of God or the Oracle to destroy it. But, what befell the First Oracle? Some say he was killed by Belial or one of his evil troops. But the power of the Oracle is great. Others say the Oracle abandoned his quest, and was punished. But in smaller circles, it is believed that the power of the Oracle gives its host the ability to see reality and existence. Perhaps the Oracle found out something better left untold, and the knowledge destroyed him. Reality is but a dream, dreams are but images... »

Ambrosia was spellbound. The story was certainly no tale about a puppy. Having an awkward silence for a few minutes, we eventually resolved the situation simply by changing the subject. Elias decided to talk about his trip over, how he had managed to finish the Philosopher's Stone, and how he had managed to make it over without the rest of the party. “This is a handy tool,” he said, “normally, I'd be only able to use light and dark magic against creatures that attacked me, limiting the amount of mystic power I can use. But this... this lets me convert my mystic power into alchemy! Why, you should have

seen the things that I tried with this...” and so, he began to babble. Aqorm seemed relieved that he was safe. Finally, he said, “but enough about that! We have two tasks to be done before we can leave this town.” The group looked confused. “Two?” asked Zoe. Elias clarified, “Yes. Based on my research residing in Aquamundo, Kushiyama is known for two secrets. The first is that in Kushiyama graveyard, there exists a single grave that is set aside by itself, which contains a riddle. Should we answer this riddle correctly, there is a rare and powerful artifact to be had. We may one day need this on our quest. Second, there is an old law on the books that says that the king is obligated to grant anyone who wishes a boat out of town. It was set up so that none would be stranded in Kushiyama, since this whole continent is ice, they did not want to be sued for the death of people outside of town. We shall do both of these before we leave.”

AMBROSIA

Love your neighbor as yourself. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Why was it not, do not do unto others as you would not have them do unto you? I had always heard it this way. It was about respecting personal boundaries, right? That is why we made laws, so people who not do things like steal from each other. Plenty of people therefore tried to treat their neighbor well, but... like myself? I knew plenty of people who loved themselves but not their neighbor. Or who loved their neighbor but hated themselves. For that matter, I knew plenty of people who tried to treat others well, only to wind up feeling used. While it's not good to be a narcissist, I think what the Aiken guy was saying might have a point. But something about this seems different.

I didn't have much time to dwell on this before we were dragged into a graveyard. Ugh, the last time I went into one of those, that creepy old lady tried to give me a Jar of Human Tears. Supposedly, the undead hate human sadness to such a degree that they flee the other way. Even though she was giving massive amounts away for free, I wasn't about to take it. Luckily, we now have an alchemist with light/dark powers, so he made like a ton of holy water before we entered. It's pretty simple to make, actually. He simply mixed well water, white carnation petals, and black salt (*kala namak*), which to be honest, looked more like little rocks. He ground it to a fine pinkish-gray powder, and I could smell a strange sulfur aroma not to be found in regular salt. After soaking this for a bit, he strained all the solids out. This could destroy a ghost! Or it could hurt a demon, I suppose. Anyway, he gave me the excess black salt to use in cooking. Although we had still some money, as time went on, buying stuff seemed less and less important. We still bought potions, but most of our weapons and armor now seemed enough, and since our gear was rustproof, sturdy, and fairly effective. Still, it didn't seem all that important despite being in a big town. We got a few wooden stakes, since there were vampires.

The entrance to the graveyard emptied out into a maze of tombstones trees, tall grass, and flowers, which was split off by a large stone wall from the rest of the town. We could have come here in the morning. We *should* have come here in the morning. We didn't. We used all of our time reading books, and then Elias made holy water. Around the corner, a Grim closed in. Like most undead, they are fatally week to holy-typed thaumaturgy, but unlike most undead, they are incredibly fast and there's the whole touch of death thing. I'd tried to use Alexander, only to be forced to run. Elias tossed some holy water at that one, and it burst into blue flame. But that trick wouldn't work twice. Three Grims closed in, and Elias let them have it, but they scattered apart. It did provide a window where we could run, and we took it, heading toward one gravestone that was in a gated area all by itself. “That's the tomb,” panted Elias, “we just need to get inside,” and he wheezed, “and solve the puzzle.” We moved closer. Ten yards, three yards, three feet. Then, the Grim caught up with us, surrounding us and closing in fast.

AZRAEL

Love. People don't really think about that as more than a word, but when it seems like their last moments, they start worrying about those they care about. Aqorm and Elias stopped running, and held each other close. Ambrosia cried, while Nevras grabbed her and told her that it would be over soon. Zoe grabbed my shoulder. The thing about this emotion, it's often viewed as a weakness by stupid people. But really, it makes people strong. That moment, I created a Barrier the likes of which were far beyond my normal

limits, touching the fencing around the grave. The Grim were knocked back like rag dolls, pushed a good fifty feet away. Likewise, the nearby tombstones pushed over, in some cases breaking or uprooting from the grass and soil. We made it inside the fence, and I quickly collapsed the spell, which was making me extremely tired. I instead enchanted a smaller section, that of the fence itself. True, I wouldn't be able to access that mystic power while it was active, but I didn't expect it to be active forever. The Grims were already breaking it down, so it would merely buy time.

Elias read the inscription, «Five senses make up the feelings. I am not a sense, but I make the feelings stronger. I am a gift. Sometimes I am returned, sometimes I am rejected. I am called the greatest thing, but when people have me, they need me. People seek after me, even though it may bring pain or sorrow. The more of me is given, the more of myself there is.» As I say, love is a powerful thing. Sometimes, it saves your life. “Love,” I said, “the answer is love.” Elias pressed the letters into the tombstone, and immediately a pit opened up under us all, then closed again.

We landed in a crypt. It wasn't the friendliest place to be, but at least we made it there alive. The crypt turned a sharp corner, and we saw coffins, lots and lots of coffins. Granted, this was a crypt, but here vampires popping out were a distinct possibility. In fact, it was so much of one, that Ambrosia used Alexander to sweep the area. A pity that wouldn't work. The coffins acted as a sort of insulation, shielding the energy of the attack from affecting the inside. We spied a treasure chest that was clearly what Elias had been looking for earlier, but we couldn't get to it but through all of these coffins. I can imagine some sort of scenario where we all gather around the chest and then vampires pop out and start biting us. Well, I'm sorry to disappoint, but I haven't time for this crap. I used Fire on some of the coffins, burning coffin and body inside alike. Elias tried out his Fire Bomb alchemy effect on some of the other, drawing a careful circle, then using the Philosopher's Stone as catalyst. Ordinarily, alchemy would use materials as a sacrifice in order to produce this kind of energy, but since he had a renewable source with the Stone, it was much easier. I imagine the stone does have drawbacks though.

At last, we were able to reach the chest. There was still one coffin up near the top that had not burned, since it was a natural rock carved into a casing for the dead.

AMBROSIA

It sucked that we were doing this. These were people. I suddenly understood what Jesus meant. The reason the expression is not don't treat others like you wouldn't want to be treated, was because it was never intended as a moral law but a sort of sense of generating positive karma. I'm pretty neutral though, I think I just don't want to see things get *more* screwed up. Like, why do any of us have to die? I requested, “Ummmm, let's not try to kill any more vampires unless we have to, okay?” Azrael nodded sheepishly.

I fussed with the chest until finally it was open, then held my treasure high in the air for all to see. I got Jump Boots! These things were kind of handy, I could jump over pits and climb small sections of rock, even up mountainsides. But the best part? My friends were able to grab on, and I would jump despite being weighed down. I was pretty good at jumping and climbing, but that last part meant I didn't leave my allies stranded. “Alright,” I said, “looks like it's time to go...” I no sooner spoke than the last coffin shook.

A fist punched through. Those dirty communist vampires, they just kept coming, wanting to take the blood I had worked hard for. Ummm, yea, I dunno why I said that, except the fist looked straight out of a lot of Industrial Workers of the World posters. The Followers actually worked hard and gave back, while these guys just sucked the blood and drained the life of other people. Like socialists everywhere with all their high taxes.

Nevras tells me to stop ranting. Ummmm, yea, so anyway, an attractive blond vampire exited the coffin. For a vampire, I suppose she was dressed modestly. No low-cut dresses, no short skirt, she wore a thick white blouse and a skirt that came below the knee. She looked like a waitress in a high-class pub. The Followers and vampires are pretty easy to distinguish, honestly. It's all in their eyes. The eyes of a Follower are like a human, while a vampire is so strongly affected by the bloodlust that it turns their eyes blood red, and gives them a weird focus. Despite being superficially attractive, that sense of need, of using people as food, made her completely unappealing. And yet, most of the

party were in her thrall. Come on, she's not *that* sexy. I went right up to Nevras as he was repeating, “I love you...” to the vamp, so I slapped him and yelled, “Snap out of it!” Suddenly, the curse of hypnosis was broken. Elias was unaffected since his staff generated a mild Protection Against Harm ward. Aqorm was unaffected because the entire time she was looking at Elias when the vampire was using her glare effect. Zoe and Azrael on the other hand, they were completely in a trance. I whispered something to Nevras, and he agreed. Aqorm asked, “what are you...?” She saw us getting them to face each other, and suddenly understood. We pushed them close together and said, “Now kiss...” Their lips touched, and the spell was broken, and for a while they did just that. Until they saw people watching and jumped apart. Zoe demanded, “What do you think you're doing?!?” Azrael likewise overreacted, “Me?!? What about you?” Oh c'mon, you girls aren't fooling anyone.

In any case, now that none of us were affected, we were free to deal with the vampire. As long as its coffin was intact, it would keep respawning from its coffin. We had to come up with a plan. I mumbled something quick to the others, knowing that plans said aloud have a tendency to fail. The next few moments happened very quickly. Aqorm used the oldest trick in the book, pointing behind her and saying, “Hey, look! Isn't that a demonic duck of some sort?” To her great shock, no such thing was there. Nevras used the window of opportunity to rush through the exit, and up the stairs to the surface. I followed, using my ability to move with the flow to sweep past her, sidestepping around her as she turned back around, then ducking under her as she tried to grab me. She kept trying, but I always managed to move just out of her reach, until finally I was above ground. Aqorm used the distraction I provided, and her speed and agility as an elf to join us. Elias tried to head out as well, but was promptly grabbed. “I didn't catch all the others,” she said, “but I will catch you. Time for dinner!”

But she didn't get the chance. Azrael stabbed her hard with the rune-covered sword Raphael, and the runes lit up with the words, «Thus always to...» I couldn't make out the rest as they were embedded in the woman's body. She screamed and dropped Elias, allowing him to make a hasty retreat. She tried to move away, yet the sword's suction held her fast, and a moment later, the sword blazed into flame. She frantically squirmed, but then Zoe yelled out, “*Fire*!” and a column of flame burned her physical form to cinders. Azrael shoved the sword Raphael back in her sheath.

This wasn't the end. Vampires would return to their coffin, restored, after only a few minutes. By the time we left the graveyard, the vampire would be on our heels. Sure enough, our group couldn't leave fast enough. We made it past the library, past the bank, and past the market square. We would enter the nearby tavern for safety, yet the owner told us there was no room in the inn. And all of the other buildings were boarded up for the night with signs saying «Vampires not welcome!» or «If you don't work, you don't eat.» Which was just fine for making sure they didn't get invited, but it kind of sucked for us in the dead of night. Jesus, but we really needed help in the worst way.

We looked up and saw a woman kneeling in prayer. She was a brunette with soft curls, and a long flowing white cloth with red sections. Somehow, she seemed brand new, aside from a strange scar as though her hands had been poked. Her clothes didn't have any dirt on them. Maybe she was the groundskeeper?

“Father,” she said, “I have come so that all might be Saved. If it is your will, show them the Way.” She looked up at me. There was something about her face... like I had just seen her a few hours ago. She pointed to the vampire, “You there, Ordelia,” making the vampire shocked that she knew her by name, “why do you take what is not given? Do you not know that there is enough for all? I will teach you how to see abundance in your life, if you will follow me.” The vampire, apparently named Ordelia, snarled like a beast showing her fangs, “Silence! I will never follow you! I would sooner...” She stopped mid-sentence. As far as we could tell, the girl wasn't dominating the vampire in any way, she just calmly stared at the other woman. She just spoke calmly, yet with great authority, “Come out of her, you parasite!” The woman started making a croup cough, finally spitting out a small leech from her body.

The woman known as Ordelia cringed from the sight, then began stomping feverishly on the critter. The former vampire, grabbed the girl in a large hug, and held her

for quite some time. Ordelia cried, “My life has been such a mess! The others promised me I wouldn't grow old, I just had to keep drinking blood. There were so many of them, and they seemed to having everything figured out so I... Oh God, I hate myself so much!” She continued her hug, speaking calming words, “There there, no worries! You have the rest of your life to live. I love you! If I love you, you don't need to worry, even if you don't like yourself right now.”

She turned to us, “The streets of this town are filled with parasites, but you should be safe here.” I suddenly understood who it was that was speaking to me. Anyway, she showed the lot of us inside a building I didn't notice before. The former vampire cried herself to sleep, while she told us, “Tomorrow you will need to continue your journey. Seek King Yama. He is a brutal man, but bound by laws. He will grant you a boat. Head south the temple of Isis. Next, you will need to find your way to the Divine Border, what is known as Heaven. Then, make your way to the Island Closest to Hell.” She paused, “Ah. Someone else is calling my name. I must be elsewhere.” She left the room, saying, “Remember... I am always with you...” And then, we were alone. Or *were* we?

We slept the night, then just before the morning, we decided to pay King Yama a visit. We moved toward the northern part of town. This area was walled off from the rest, with a silver and wrought iron gate. The gates had opened early, as though they were expecting us. A large muscular man we found inside the gate. Like the others, he had fangs, only this one appeared to not be particularly hungry for our blood. Aqorm asked, “What are you doing inside the gates?” The man explained, “Your king signed a treaty with our kind. In exchange for our protection from outside invasion, we can roam the town freely at night. So there is a curfew.” There was no possible way having a ton of parasites in their employ could ever end badly. Passing the man, we greeted the guards and explained our business. The large stone door opened to the immense brown stone manor house. The house was built centuries ago, had more bedrooms and bathrooms than there were people, and complete with gardens and wine cellars great for trapping people inside the wall. Kushiyama, as I later came to understand, was an old-school welfare state. They raised penalties on businesses to the point where people had to choose between owning a home and a business, and contrary to laws against it by the Council, King Yama figured out loopholes to get people to pay taxes. He did so by calling it service fees for government programs. For instance, his palace had a rather large dining hall where the poor could eat for “free” (making sure to have their name down) only to pay a literal king's ransom in taxes later on, or “free” bedding in one of the many bedrooms for those merchants who had been forced out of their homes through financially ruinous business licenses. To put it mildly, he was a total asshole. His house was nice though, covered with red velvet carpeting, fine paintings, the latest magical advances, and access to the net.

We bowed to the king, as much as we would later regret it. “We have come,” I said, “to beg you for a boat. Our quest demands it.” King Yama took a look at us, then at Nevras. “Ah,” he said, “Crown Heir Nevrasia Astra Fitz Embor Phoenix III, so nice of us to join us. Now tell me, why can you not furnish such a ship for your group?” Nevras sighed, “Ambrosia here,” pointing to me, “blackmailed the king with compromising photos of myself...” King Yama had the look of someone well acquainted with dirty laundry of the Phoenix royal family, and nodded, “I see. Yet still, your Royal Crest should be able to... they took it, then? As punishment?” He nodded sheepishly. The king grinned malevolently, “I will simply decide you peasants are in the economic minority. This should provide an excuse for my welfare scheme, allowing me to raise taxes another 80% and declare every merchant making above 15000 Gold past the margin for tax exemption.” I groaned, shared with most everyone in the party, except for Aqorm, who was okay with large-scale theft. In any case, heavy guilt aside, we had our ship.

Since we didn't want to backtrack, we followed the advice of the girl (who was obviously Jesus) and headed south, avoiding the Elder Formless we encountered before. We docked on a rough port, and made it to the frozen town of Kirin, just outside the Temple of Isis. The town of Kirin was coated in snow up to our waist, and there was an active blizzard in this town. The houses were very simple yet sturdy with no windows.

Overall, the outside of the houses were vacant, aside from a few people sweeping paths and a Yuki-Onna hanging about like nothing was uncomfortable about the weather. And for her (him?) this was probably true.

We browsed one store that had armor and weapons made from dragon scales and bones. They were of incredible quality, but unfortunately they were far too expensive for us right now. The shopkeeper was a lizard man who refused to haggle, and screamed at us whenever we opened the door. We headed to the inn to rest, but it was far too cold, so instead we scouted around the town. There were some people hanging about that seemed to be life skills coaches. One was a strongman lifting enormous boulders, and the other was a swordsman.

NEVRAS

I watched Ambrosia test her strength. The guy was a beast. Ambrosia was able to lift some boulders, but this was with the help of her Gigas Gloves. “No, no! That's not right,” he said, “You're using that to do all the work. Do it without that tool!” Ambrosia looked confused, “Huh? What do you mean?” He pointed to my gloves, “Listen. A long time ago, people built technology. But where do you think all of these things came from? From the mind! Everything we build is in our head. And so is this rock. I want you to visualize this as it truly is, merely a figment of your imagination.” He was talking about mind over matter, of a very severe degree. I later tried this, and was unable to reproduce it. Yet something about her training before meant she took to this stuff like a fish to water. She lifted, pulled, and pushed this stone even though it was much larger than the boulders she had previously lifted. She tried to punch the boulder, and wound up hurting her wrist. The man shook his head, “You can't use your strength that way.” She asked, “Huh? Why not?” He explained, “Everyone has limits. Most people can't do what you just did because of self-doubt. But you have kindness in your heart. You see what that kind of punch could do to a living creature and you can't bring yourself to do that. Don't worry about it, though. This skill is still very handy when you need to move pillars or stones out of the way.”

Meanwhile, I studied under the swordsman. He was performing a technique he called the Silencing Stab. It was a technique that warriors used against wonder-workers, because it not only temporarily silenced them (by a sharp poke to a pressure point) but also was able to drain out excess mystic power. I had to watch him several times because it was a technique that required great skill.

At last, we completed our training. Since this town was far too cold, and since we had little money, we made do with our newly expanded tent. Well, made do is silly to suggest when the tent we enter has a mansion. Day broke, and we walked from the outskirts of Kirin over towards Isis Temple.

CHAPTER 17

In which Ambrosia faces herself, and her own mortality.

GOD

Isis Temple, like many temples, serves a purpose other than what people expect. You see, most humans do not accurately understand the purpose of a temple. They see it as a place to gather for worship, or to help the poor, or things like that. Well, to be fair, such things can be done within such grounds, but that is not their purpose. The actual purpose of a temple is actually to *contain* things.

A long time ago, humans believed in idols. They saw statues as their gods. They saw land, people, or objects as sacred. This is backwards. This was humans turning the divine, which is all around us, into a thing. You must understand, there are no holy places, no holy people, and no holy books. This is because all that exists is sacred, yet humans mistakenly believed that to be holy is to be set apart.

Temples are built on specially selected ground, and often built over other temples. The land mana gathers in the area, specifically because the temple draws and contains energy. It is important to understand this, because this allows you to understand why the Oracles are where they are. The Oracle Alexander, for instance, was contained in the

deepest darkness. Remember, in deepest darkness shines the light. Chronos was in a building immune to the decay of time. Likewise, Thanatos, the Oracle of Death, resides in a building that is designed to draw life energy.

For the record, I cannot be contained. The Jews wanted to keep me close. They liked the idea of building me a home. But their home became a Temple. And then the Temple became an idol. When the New Earth came, the Jews tried to again build a Temple. I told them flatly, “Oh not again!” Then I burned the place down with lightning. If humans need to reach me, I live in a tent now.

AZRAEL

Isis Temple is an architectural marvel. White marble brick and four cylindrical towers with conical tops paved the building. The towers each were joined at the base and the tiles of the roof with what appeared to be jade, a material famed for its ability to absorb certain energies and deflect others. The door was also made from solid jade.

As we pushed the door open, it felt heavy, perhaps from all of the negativity that it was holding back. Inside the building, the onyx not only provided a screen to further absorb and contain this death energy, but it allowed the room to take on a very gloomy feel. Despite being well-lit, despite it being midday outside, I felt like we were visiting a candlelight vigil in the middle of the night. A wall cut the inside of the building in an omega-shaped pattern, atop which two angel warrior statues sat, with a small group of cultists gathered in the indent.

The cultists, by all appearances, weren't normal. Of the four standing near Thanatos, only one was unhooded, and the others appeared to either be undead or in various states of magical decay. I talked with the nearest ones first.

The two nearest ones told me, “Magic comes from life energy. Normally, this energy is channeled from the living things nearby, but it can also be taken from dead things. This force is called sorcery, or in some circles, necromancy.” And also, “Magic that uses life comes from things like love or happiness. Magic that uses death comes from things like sorrow or loneliness. But, of course, both are part of the truth of existence.” As I've probably said, magic's power comes from belief. If this is true, what about faulty belief systems? Logically, this means they feel the effects of their faulty beliefs.

It's like this. Necromancy is simply a subset of clerical ability, specifically involving spells that produce darkness or cause death. Necromancy is not sorcery, sorcery involves mainly time/space abilities, although it does have some light/dark applications. And lastly, all magic whether thaumaturgy or sorcery, comes from the spirit not from life or death. Trying to use magic that way did weird things to the body. And it showed, one of these guys had no flesh at all and was a mass of bones. The other was a zombie with insects actively gnawing on its remaining muscle and skin; his skin had a blackish-green hue as a result of putrefaction. It was clear that his limbs had fallen from his body several times, and had been sewn back together. A typical zombie not also preserved by runes had a lifespan of roughly about five to eleven years (at most, less for extremes in moisture) before their body entered advanced rot, and then they'd crumble into lifeless bones (which could be reanimated as a skeleton, but was worthless as a zombie).

The other hooded one told us, “Everything in existence has a dark side to it. Remember that...” He was presumably referring to his own experiences with using mystic power. From the looks of it, he understood how to properly wield thaumaturgy, but looked like he had become greedy and tried to do something ill-advised. If I had to say, I'd guess that he probably tried to use a ritual to absorb magic. Magic could be expended through use all the way to one's limit, and after that the toll would be taken on the body. Of course, many corrupt wonder-workers tried to do the reverse to gain power by theft. What few of them know is that God punishes such theft, short of borrowing. Such gain cannot really be supported long term by the body. The circulatory system has a minor runestream through which mystic power flows, and it gradually grows as the person gains in mystic power, similar to a muscle. This is sometimes called the *dantian*, or internal ley system. However, the body is not designed to hold excess mystic power that is not its own. As a result, such energy starts to solidify into runes, and these runes gather until they set off an explosive reaction. He was what is known as “blasted,” his veins were all

blistered and ruined, and he was no longer capable of harnessing mystic power. Instead, he seemed to be constantly leaking mystic power in a vain attempt to get his body back to normal. The mystic power seeped out at a constant rate but his body could not detect the stolen energy, and so it was generating more energy to compensate for a perceived loss. He was suffering for his theft, and probably would continue to do so until he admitted what he had done to himself, and gave the excess back. I tried not to look too much at him, he was a bit scary, especially his eyes.

The last one was what appeared anyway to be a young teenager. Judging from her serious look and her place among the others, I'd have to guess she was much, much older than she appeared. We talked to her, to find out how she did it. She said, “The source of magic isn't as big an issue as how it is used. I have learned that necromancy can be used to restore the lives of the dying. Whereas my comrades here have begun to show signs of rot from the use of their powers, I alone have retained my humanity. Still, best to be careful...” It showed. We asked her later how old she was, and it turned out that she was about as old as most half-elves currently in existence.

ELIAS

Having spoken with most of the others, and gotten a good sense of this group, we decided to face Thanatos. He was terrifying. His body was nearly as wide as the walls surrounding him and he was 25 ft tall. Perhaps you readers do not understand the implications of this, so I'll explain. A super model such as Lindsey Lohan, with a D-cup standing at 25 ft would have one breast weigh 200 lb, her entire body weigh about 3 tons, and would be able to crush cars just by leaning on them wrong (by the way, since the New Earth, the square-cube law no longer appeared to exist, dinosaurs the size of Godzilla were fully a possibility, they just kept to themselves, eating their massive amounts of fish). His skin was mottled gray flesh and his body left the person viewing it to recall the expression of “skin and bones.” He had no hair, muscle, fat, or eyes, what he had instead of eyes were black flames. His body itself was covered with an aura of black, and I could tell any battle we had with him was likely to be challenging. Maybe we could talk peacefully?

AMBROSIA

Life is made up of choices. I know, it's tempting when poor or suffering to say, “Welp, I guess it's my fate.” What a load of crap. Yes, there are some times when a person feels powerless, but it's hardly fate. Sometimes, it's not about your choices, though, it's about *their* choices. Like the guy deciding to donate 10 Copper a day to help those starving children in a foreign land, only to be thwarted by the guy who runs the country taxing the poor and suffering out of even that amount. Or like today.

We didn't even get a chance to speak. Thanatos said, “All who face death, must risk their life. So, I shall kill you all.” So saying, the darkened one raised his hand. Like the man blasted from absorbing too much mana, he begin to suck stuff out of those nearby cultists, all except the girl. It didn't seem to be their magic he was sucking away, and unlike the other guy, he wasn't storing it, but weaving it straight into magic. I say it wasn't magic, because as whatever it was started getting drawn away, those three began to disappear. In their place, Thanatos formed a circle of darkness around me. I made a decision as well, I decided to touch the darkness. When I did, everything changed. A shadow of some sort formed in the corner of the room behind Thanatos. But let's talk about that later.

With his next trick, Thanatos spoke the ancient words, “*Rise from your grave!*” Up from the ground came zombies and skeletons, and even ghosts appeared from somewhere in the room. Now most people think of undead as a sort of cannon fodder just there to be extra attackers, but it's not like that. Each of them have special abilities. Ghosts can possess people, zombies are freakishly strong and their bite causes wounds to fester with maggots (no, they don't spread their zombie traits, that's vampires), and skeletons can throw their bones and reassemble themselves again and again.

Caught off guard, Nevras and Aqorm were not in formation. So, Aqorm was fighting zombies, and her knives were not long enough to keep from being bitten and taking all of the effort of Elias to heal her condition over and over. Meanwhile, Nevras had his hands

full keeping the skeletons back. He could cut their bones using his sharp sword, but other than that, they seemed to keep patching themselves up. He swung his sword in a broad arc and bashed a couple with his shield, but because it wasn't an elven sword, they kept getting back up. I realized that if I didn't help, Elias would probably run out of mystic power, and everyone would die. At the same time, Azrael was constantly trying to free

I made my decision, and decided to buy time for Elias. I used the powers of Chronos to stop the zombies. The stance I used was called Parting The Wild Horse's Mane, and it had a vaguely hourglass shape to the movement of my hands. A burst of grey flooded the area, buying just enough time for Elias to use his alchemy. Working carefully he made the circle, then he used the Ice Canister formula (with the help of the Philosopher Stone) to freeze the skeletons. This bought Nevras enough time to switch places with Aqorm. I retracted the time effect, and watched the zombies suddenly return to normal speed, looking slightly confused as a new person sat in front of them. The Ice Canister only made a frost dusting on the skeletons, not a solid block of ice (although it was often deadly to living creatures), so as time went on, the skeletons began to wiggle their bones again. Aqorm's elven blades quickly reacted with the skeletons, causing them to disintegrate into a pile of bone dust. Nevras quickly slashed the zombies to tiny chunks.

Azrael, however was still having trouble with these ghosts. One just possessed Zoe while we watched. As much as Zoe was clearly into Azrael before, the ghost was downright horny, touching and kissing her for quite some time.

AZRAEL

I have three major options against the dead. Exorcism, Banishment, and Purification. Unfortunately, I'm lousy at Banishment, I can only drive the dead a few feet away, I can't move them miles away or to another dimension. But it was enough to free Zoe temporarily of the ghosts' control. Freshly formed ghosts, like one might get from simply summoning them, are fairly easy to destroy, just with holy magic. But those who legitimately died and have regrets have to be purified.

Someone like Ambrosia may ask, “Why doesn't she use Exorcism to wipe out all of the dead, including the ones possessing Zoe?” Well, it's not that simple. Normally, living things are immune to divine energies for the simple reason they have a living body. Think of a body as a house. When a person is possessed, it is as if the door to their soul has been forced open, exposing the inside. If I try to use Exorcism, I risk hurting both the ghost and the host. So it was that I had to slowly defeat these ghosts.

I'll admit, I did allow Zoe to kiss me for longer than necessary. I could feel the passion in the kiss. Even when possessed, the feelings of the original remain, it's one of the ways people not skilled in getting rid of ghosts cast them out, get the ghost to do something the host fears or hates. It was a good excuse for her to do what she was afraid to in public. Finally, seeing that they were starting to stare anyway, I got rid of the effect. Zoe objected to me apparently having my way with her, even though she was the one on top of me.

Anyway, seeing as how she was no longer possessed, Elias tried to use his version of Exorcism. He intoned, “*Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One. Blessed is His name, whose glorious kingdom is forever and ever.”* It wasn't very effective. This is not like a “my religion is better than yours” thing, he just had no talent with Exorcism. It swept away the wreckage of the previously defeated undead, and probably prevented more from being summoned, but it wasn't enough to dispense with these upper-level ghosts, much less fully-bodied skeletons and zombies. It was, however, enough to buy me the time I needed to do my own Exorcism. I screamed, “*Rin Pyou Tou Sha Kai Chin Retsu Zai Zen*!” At once, the ghosts faded into the air thick with the dark aura of Thanatos. I purified what remained.

He looked a bit pissed. Aqorm and Nevras slashed at him with weapons and techniques, but as I say, he was about 3 tons of mass, and a being with more in common with the undead than the living. Even her elven blades had virtually no effect. Zoe burned at his body with Fire spells, and Elias and I began to blast him with holy magic. He was tough though, it definitely caused him pain, but not enough to bring him down. And then he began to attack.

AMBROSIA

Thanatos was a fierce customer. He tried to disembody his hands so as to pop them up from underground or from midair, and try to grab us to squeeze the life out. We had to be on guard at all times. He blasted balls of darkness on random parts of the room. He sent waves of a sort of black fire to keep us pinned and off guard. Every now and then, he got in a lucky hit, and Elias with his best healing spell, only just managed to rescue us from the brink of death.

Aqorm, seeing that the temple didn't match Thanatos much, decided to call upon her geomancy for the day. The immense energy of the temple provide enough holy energy to flood the room with white light. It burned at his skin, until he decided to put a stop to it. "*Death*," he said, pointing his long bony finger her direction.

AZRAEL

I have learned many symbols and spells over the years. I know how to bind hands and feet without any rope, I know how to create fires or put them out, I know how to do weird tricks. So it may come as a surprise that one of the most difficult spells I have ever learned was this very spell. It isn't because it takes too much mystic power, no, that isn't the problem. It's that the spell has no form. I'll put it like this. When practicing a spell, the spell flashes or dims, bursts into flame, does something noticeable. With death, there's nothing. If I point at a table, there's no sign anything happened. The only way, in fact, to test whether this spell was effective enough to work was to try it out on living things. I could only take it as far as bunnies. The beasties in the cage would be making hopping and squeaking sounds one minute, and the next, it was like cutting the strings of a puppet.

Aqorm crumpled in a heap. Elias had come a long way since he started, and was able to do a full-blown resurrection without significant trouble, thanks to his extensive reading in all those libraries. But...

AQORM

Elves and dwarves believe in Norse legends about what happens after death. I would obviously go to Alfheim after I died. But I didn't get to see it. God apparently don't like people coming back remembering near-death or resurrection experiences, so although people know there is an Afterlife, they can't impose their version on others. I awoke feeling refreshed, but I quickly told Elias to withdraw from the battle with me. Not like either of us could do much any more, he was almost out of magic, and I had spent it all.

We watched from a distance far enough to dodge most spells he sent our way (spells are like a pistol shot, the closer the range, the less likely normal people can dodge them), but I was able to see and hear normally with my elf senses. I watched him make all sorts of bad status spells and dark magic, but Azrael raised everyone's resistance against dark energy and death to the point where what happened to me wouldn't happen to anyone else. Not as easily anyway. He still had tons of other ways to kill us.

For instance, he used magic to blind Nevras, and then grabbed him. Before he could squeeze though, Azrael cried out, "*Aura Bolt*!" Unlike many of her offensive spells, this one was non-elemental. She didn't use it much, because it was offensively far weaker than his elemental spells and only able to hit one target, but it was also exactly what she needed, one pinpoint attack in a specific spot. She struck the hand sticking from underground right directly below the wrist portion of its thumb. The hand, thin and bony as it was, still had some reflexes, and opened just enough so that Nevras could move for half a second. That was enough. Nevras pivoted, and used Speed Slash on a back-swing Thanatos's disembodied hand went limb, and Thanatos himself writhed in agony. He glared at Azrael, obviously having enough of her. Then he said the words in the ancient language, "*Btvf iv smhi nmhw*!" I felt like I was hearing something that not only was a cipher, but also backwards. I had no hope of understanding what he was saying. He opened his mouth wide and ate something, and Azrael collapsed in a heap.

AZRAEL

It is a well-known fact that contrary to stories like Faust, a person cannot really trade away their soul by contract. Well, it used to be one, then people got duped by stories like *Faust*. A soul is a birthright from God. Nobody can steal it. If anyone looking on were to mistakenly believe that I got my soul stolen, I would never forgive myself. It was

borrowed, against my permission. That seems like an absurd amount of semantics, but it isn't. My soul is still mine, it can neither be destroyed nor absorbed into another. But it can be temporarily taken outside my body. But it only is borrowed, because if the person sucking up the soul is defeated, the soul is returned to its proper host. This is why I'm able to write this today.

While gone from the body, the body is dead, and unable to be revived. However, the person holding the soul can animate it much like a puppet, even using spells. But Thanatos was too noble or too busy to bother with something like that. I could see everything as a result of my soul being in his possession, although my perspective was through his eyes, not my own. My eyes were open, and a film would form over those if I was out of my body for too long. I watched Elias fail to revive me. I watched the others as they attacked Thanatos. And then I watched, as something strange happened to Zoe.

ZOE

"I can't raise her," said Elias. I had tried too, but his Resurrection was way better than my easy Revive ability. My heart felt empty, I didn't know how to deal. I snapped and went into a super form. Well, technically it was becoming a Sage, but anyway.

The Sage form is risky. Normally, this is dangerous, for several different reasons. First, as I am told by the experts of my sect, such abilities probably only activate while in deep meditation. That probably means sitting akimbo for hours, which makes it impossible for the purposes of battle. It also had to be just the right balance, something called the Tomoe (the Yin, Yang, and a third force known as Rang, between the other two). Not only were the Yin and Yang in balance, but the third one had to be in balance with the other two. Too little, and I'd be unable to effectively use or control my power. Too much, and it would go stagnant, probably. Since it was nature energy, I assumed one of the things that could happen to me was that I would turn into stone. Specifically, a stone frog. I dunno why I assumed that.

I had always assumed that I needed to be in a state of calm. But today, I was trying to be calm, while at the same time overcome by feelings of fear and anger and love. And then, a feeling of balance for all these other feelings arose from inside my heart. I managed to finally feel calm despite everything, and then something just clicked. I felt energy inside and outside of me, as things came into balance. I had finally managed to awaken as a Sage.

My eyes had opened very wide, and suddenly I could see *everything.* I could see individual runes inside my body, and floating around in the air. In this room, for instance, I saw the runes for Air in the current of air. I saw the many different symbols of two Exorcism attempts. I saw the Death, Darkness, and Decay runes floating around Thanatos. I saw the follower of Thanatos from before, with her balance of Life and Death runes. Not only runes, but I could see and hear well beyond normal. The fly from across the room, I could tell in detail how its wings looked. I could hear in all directions within the room and tell the exact location of a pin drop. And the smells, oh my, yes I could smell seriously well. Nevras's feminine odor, despite his having worked up some serious sweat. Aqorm's odor was almost like a wet forest. Elias smelled of books and ink. Ambrosia didn't smell like much of anything, actually, except maybe dirt.

It wasn't just the ability see stuff, or my other senses, though. My body was way stronger than before, I could tell that much right now. Just as a test, I tried to cut myself, and apparently not only was my skin much firmer than before (hitting myself with my scythe hard enough to cut my arm off before barely made a pinprick), but the wound healed immediately. I had fast healing now!

I tried to cast magic as before, only to realize that it no longer worked the same way. Thinking quickly, I came up with a rough theory of what was going on with me, based on what I had observed so far. Normally, the human body had its *dantian* as part of their spirit and this what allowed them to draw mana, along with using techniques. In fact, the difference between martial techniques and magic was that warriors typically had no ability to convert this energy into mystic power, so it instead circulated through the body. Because runes were normally inside my body, runes outside were attracted like a magnet by verbal spells. But now, energy flowed outside my body, forming a protective field that

kept me in good health, but this repelled most runes. It meant I could push or pull runes to make spells of a sort, but they wouldn't be as organized as before. It also meant... well, I decided to test things out rather than thinking too much.

I rubbed my hands together, heating them up. Around my palm area, a faint Fire rune lit. I blew on it, urging it into being. Suddenly, a large flame formed in the palm of my hand. Good, my guess was right! I can use magic. Sort of. It was all *senju* though, so it was a learning curve. I resolved to use the other benefit of my state. Antimagic.

Since I could push away runes, I could also break them apart. I rushed forward, scythe in hand. Thanatos was visibly worried, despite being freakishly strong. He cast darkness, but I could see the runes even after they had formed together. And I could break them. The flames and balls of darkness, I sundered just by grasping them and pulling them apart. I pulled out my scythe. Thanatos's concern turned to desperation. He pointed at me and said, "*Death.*" Normally, a spell of death was invisible. Yet I saw the runes as they formed into a spidersilk-thin line that urged toward me. With the one hand free, I grasped the spell and pulled it to the ground. And then, I charged with my scythe.

AZRAEL

I saw everything from my perch inside Thanatos. Zoe had transformed in front of me. I guess in terms of transformation, it wasn't on par with green skin and huge muscles. All that could be seen to change about her was a few minor details. Somehow or other, the energy she was giving off was changing her green karate outfit into a green dress which fanned out at the bottom. It appeared she was reshaping her nearby reality, but some of it didn't even seem to be a conscious thing. She needed to move her arms and legs freely, and both appeared strong enough to rip clothing, so her clothing changed. She wanted to be able to see everything, so her eyes became golden like the immortals. She wanted badass hair, so her pigtails were gone, replaced with nearly knee-length silver-white hair.

I saw her as she effortlessly ripped apart Thanatos's magic. I saw as he abandoned magic and tried to attack her physically, only to realize that she was roughly equal in power to someone like him. She got bruised by his blows, but quickly recovered. He wasn't as lucky. She sliced at him with her scythe, forming scars all over his thick skin. And then, she burned at him with what seemed to be her new Fire magic, only I didn't hear her speak, so she was gathering runes together just by pulling them from the air. "Let her go!" she screamed. My heart raced. She leaped up, pulled open his mouth, and a few moments later, she was in her original form. I awoke in her embrace, again in my own body. Thanatos was furious, and would probably kill us all while Zoe was too exhausted right now to do what she did again. But somehow that didn't seem to matter. We were prepared to die together.

AMBROSIA

Weird. By all appearances, Thanatos had been trying to kill us. And yet, I had been standing still, watching everything, and nothing had happened to me. Aqorm and Elias largely had withdrawn from the battle, and he had left them alone too. Nevras wasn't really strong enough to hurt him, and probably my boyfriend now (I said it), so after that one grab attempt, he was largely ignored as well. It was like... he was testing us.

Maybe it was time I tried something. I started to use my Crests, moving seamlessly from one to another. I could use them in rapid succession only because each Crest had a recharge time, rather than the whole thing. Apollo was first, I built and expanded a large golden shield that started by protecting myself, then I moved to Azrael and Zoe nearby and continued until all my friends were inside. The position of my hands changed, and I used Chronos to slow him down. I used the Four Gods to blast him with a storm of heat and cold, fierce winds, and finally an earthquake. He was about to attack, from the looks of it, when I finished. I had enough time to gather together Alexander's Crest and pelted him with an enormous mass of holy power. It didn't destroy him. Who was this guy?

I was about to collapse, when instead of attacking, he bowed. He said, "You are indeed strong, but those who are exceptional still fall to death someday. Worse, your strength may one day become your greatest liability. Indeed, maybe today." I must have looked confused, as I asked, "What do you mean?" He asked me, "Have you not heard of the Chain of Harm? Surely you must know." He opened his hands and using a spell, he

showed us an image. A man was getting in a fight with his wife. The wife, upset, needed to take it out on someone, so she scolds her child for not picking up his toys. Having no one human younger than him, he kicks the family dog. The dog in turn, badly mauls the nearby cat. The cat finds a mouse nearby and kills it. “Did you see?” he asked. “Each time it crossed over a species, this worsened, because of a sense 'they are not like me.' Many things are lost in the Chain of Harm. For example, if all the rats die, insects overrun the land. With your great power, will you not one day harm the ones you love?”

I shook my head firmly, “I will never hurt them! Never!” He laughed, a deep cold mocking voice unsettling my confidence, “Oh really? Perhaps it's time for me to introduce you to your other self. The one you keep locked away. You see, everyone has the capacity to do harm, and the more power you have the greater this shadow within you builds. Allow me to show what **your** shadow has become after all your struggles.”

The shadow from before took form. I was surprised. This shadow became a girl. She was about my height, she had eyes like mine, but her hair and eyes were a deep purple. She wore a yellow robe and a tiara of sort, a symbol of royalty. Who was this woman? She spoke, a tone in her voice very similar to the goblins of before, “Look at those cowards back there. Aqorm, you act like a kid, but we all know how old you are. And you, always with the books. Tell her how you feel, you wimp. You lesbians here, it's not like we don't know what you're wanting to do. Stop trying so hard to hide it, you losers. And you...” She pointed to me, and gave me a stern look, “If I was in control, we would have kissed already, we'd be dating, and we'd probably have sex and be married by now. You have no guts. So I'm gonna kill this woman over here,” pointing to the follower of Thanatos that remained, “just to prove I have more nerve than you. What do you think about that?” The woman cried nervously, “No don't kill me, I'm too old to die!” Without much effort, she went back on her word, “Alright, I won't kill you. But you know what you did. All that necromancy stuff.”

Thanatos mocked us, “Do you see the level of darkness that pervades it? Surely, it will do whatever evil deeds required of it. So much for your 'righteous quest.'” I objected strongly, “That can't be right! I chose to continue this quest, when I was at the Aiken Monastery! I could surely become evil, but I could never imagine being used by other people!” The girl smiled. It was a cruel smile, but it had all the distinctive mannerisms, that I knew were true of me, it was every bit a smile I would have made. This was an Evil Ambrosia. “That's right, Ambrosia,” Evil Ambrosia spoke, “I'm your shadow, and both of us know that, good or evil, I will always follow only your decisions! Not his!” So saying, she pulled out a knife, identical to mine, and stabbed at this guy a few times. As violent as it was, something told me she was trying harder to act evil than she actually was evil, for these stabs were all nonlethal areas of the body. Well, I guess it was important for her to not lose her reputation, so I told her, “I'll stop you! Don't make me have to fight you.”

The battle began and ended rather quickly. No, not because one of us was stronger than the other. I knew that she wasn't evil as she let on, and she knew that I had no intention to harm me. We pulled out fishing poles and whacked each other a bit. I got a black eye, she got a banged up shoulder but the battle quickly ended, when Nevras came over from concern. He looked at each other us with concern, and treated our wounds. I couldn't be jealous of myself, could I? “He is so hot!” Evil Ambrosia said. “I know, really,” I responded. And suddenly, she was gone. I heard some whispers in my head, like, *be sure to tell him how much you care, okay?* And then, for awhile anyway, silence. My shoulder suddenly hurt.

Thanatos congratulated us, “You have fought not only me, but your own shadow, and retained yourself. I shall grant my Crest, but remember, your dark side is always present when you fight others. You must feel compassion for those you defeat.” I now had five of the eight Crests. This journey might be over soon, I thought.

CHAPTER 18

In which the Council falls due to extreme apathy.

THE WORLD

The Council was born after a long and brutal war through direct intervention from God. Well, inasmuch as God can give intervention. After the Great Phoenix War, God sent a stone tablet. If this sounds familiar, it should, stone tablets are one of the things God can do without risk of deus ex machina. A group of people gathered from different nations had met on an island to discuss how to keep the world from falling into ruin, or becoming just like they had heard of the original Earth with its endless wars and government meddling. They despaired that they would be able to make a difference, when suddenly, God gave them exactly what they needed.

The stone tablet contained a list of laws, each of which were given roman numerals. It looked like the U.S. Constitution, until one looked closer. The laws were as follows:

I. A governing body, thereafter known as the Anti-Government Council, or simply the Council, shall meet in this place. The Council consists leaders from each town, and only that town, unless there is an adjoining castle. Each leader can either be an elected official (such as a mayor), a hereditary official (such as a king or queen), military official (such as a daimyo or general), or other individual (such as elder, chief concubine, or shrine leader). Military leaders shall govern until defeated or killed in battle, elected officials rule for not more than ten years with re-election not more than three times, hereditary officials reign until they abdicate or die, and lastly, other officials follow whatever rules constitute their own power base (for instance, the chief concubine who shall no longer perform is relieved of office). The Council shall not be centralized government, and shall be committed to retaining sovereign towns. In order to change the nature of the Council, all members must be present to vote. All rights and privileges listed below shall be in effect so long as the Council remains.

II. The Council shall make no law prohibiting the free exercise of religion thereof or establishing a state religion. Nor abridging the freedom of speech. The right to free speech is granted by God above, no earthly power from either the government or private companies is allowed to restrict another person's right to speak. Nor shall there be any law forbidding a free press, and any are allowed to write as they will without restriction. Nor shall any law prevent the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Council for a redress of grievances.

III. Each government within the Council may hold its own army, yet there must also be a private militia to defend a free state. The rights of the people to hold arms in order to hunt, to fight, and to defend themselves against corrupt government shall not be restricted. The state shall not restrict this law except during imprisonment due to crime, and no false charges shall be used as pretext to disarm the populace. At all times, the technology of weapons should not be out of reach for self-defense, nor shall the state be sufficiently advanced to oppress the common people.

IV. All citizens have the rights to be free of government authority in their private lives. No police, soldier, or other government officer is allowed to stay within a property without consent or warrant. Nor do any such officials have the right to conduct surveillance without consent or valid reason. Nor shall any of the people therein, such as one's spouse, be molested in any way by them.

V. The right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated. No such searches may be done without consent, whether or not there would be reasonable suspicion. A citizen is entitled any use of force to defend their property, and the lives therein from any intruder, provided no one outside the property is damaged (besides the intruder). A person cannot be arrested while in their own home.

VI. No person shall be held to trial for a capital crime except under personal review by members of the Council. Nor shall anyone be compelled to testify in such a way that they testify against themselves. Nor shall anyone be deprived of life, liberty, or property without due process of law in court. Nor shall private property be taken for public use, without compensation sufficient to build new property.

VII. In all criminal prosecutions, the accused shall enjoy the right to a speedy and public trial, by an impartial and educated jury of the town wherein the crime was committed. In capital cases mentioned above, the entire Council shall convene in the town to act as judges. They shall also enjoy the right to know the nature of their crime

or have all charges dropped, and they shall have the right to know their accusers. All accused have the right to witnesses and lawyers in their defense. Excessive bail shall not be required, nor excessive fines imposed, nor unjust tortures inflicted. A person may not be turned into stone, burned forever, have their soul trapped inside an object, or otherwise be punished beyond their natural lifespan.

VIII. Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude shall exist within the regions governed by the Council. Nor is a person allowed to be paid below the minimum of which would represent enough to afford housing, food, and clothing for a month's wages. In the case of room and board, this requires that the person is not starved nor kept sleep deprived. Nor shall any taxes be levied on the direct earnings of another. A worker deserves his wages.

IX. All people are born equal under the law. This is not to say the government grants equality, this is the natural state of being. As a result of good or bad choices, a person can enter into poverty or become arrested, be deported, or otherwise suffer. Yet all people, of any race or sex or magical status are born equal, with rights such as that of voting for elected officials, holding office in such areas, to buy or build property, to borrow or repay debt, to apply for citizenship provided one obeys the laws of the area, and to attend to one's own needs through hunting, fishing, tent camping, or build fires in any area outside town. No tax shall be raised on land itself, although housing in poor repair may be taxed, in order to affect repairs. Any citizen may refuse these repairs, as they are a service.

X. The powers not delegated to the Council, are reserved to the people. The rights given shall not be construed to deny or disparage others retained by the people. Any such unjust “rights” which create specialized groups that hold unique privileges can and shall be abolished, or revised to work properly so as to uphold all rights given above.

To say that the Council gave a great number of rights and freedoms is probably an understatement. Though they were deeply hypocritical and very much problematic, they nonetheless did a great deal of good in the world around them. However, everything rested on that one clause, “All rights and privileges listed below shall be in effect so long as the Council remains.” For today, something was about to change.

It happened rather suddenly. Elder Lajila called to order the emergency meeting. The regular meeting had gone poorly, on account of King Yama's demands. The follow-up meeting to hash out details of the arrangement had met with no solution, and a third meeting was required, this emergency meeting to discuss seriously what to do since these demands apparently could not be agreed upon. This was an important meeting, as the order of business was to force abdication of King Yama by vote. This time though, the walls of the tower where they convened echoed. This time, the room felt cold. The Council was missing a majority of its members.

Lajila spoke first, true to her position as leader of the Council. “I call to order this meeting of the Anti-Government Council,” she said before looking around, “...why are there so few people at this meeting?” The guru of Shoten spoke up, “There has been unrest in the area around Zuran, so he was busy.” The Kirin chief spoke next, “Phoenix and Kushiyama have declared war on each other, so neither representative was able to arrive here.” The mayor of Ghobli shrugged, “Honestly, I don't see why it has been so hard to show up. Our nation has been doing quite well, for the time.”

His smug attitude wasn't well received. The chief exorcist of Goji answered, “Too well in fact! You've bought the silence of some of the nearby nations so they wouldn't speak against you in Council. How dare you, Mayor!” The Water King also argued with him, “You've even dumped into our oceans from your islands as part of your nation's businesses. Speaking of which, I'd like to know just how you earn your money!” He angrily responded, “I'll have you know I earned it honestly from trade with the evil wizard Yazim Jianne! I mean...”

Hinata's elder Lajila got to the point of stress where the veins in her face were showing. “**Enough**,” she fumed, “Bribery, war, consorting with dark wizards? What has happened with the Council?!? We used to be devoted to keeping countries autonomous, now look at us! We start wars, meddle in trade, and take hush money! Very well. I have

decided. We shall vote. All those in favor of disbanding the Council?" Without exception, the guru of Shoten, the Kirin chief, the exorcist of Goji, and the Water King also said, "I abstain." Lajila sighed, "I see. So none of you care, one way or another? Okay, then. I need your vote to decide, then, Mayor of Ghobli." His answer was a foregone conclusion. And just like that, he voted to disband. Lajila threw up her hands, "So, thousands of years of history, and we just quit? Fine! Build your empires, and leave my sight!" She walked off in a huff." In order to fully disband, the entire Council was needed, not just one vote. But no leader and most of the members out of the picture was enough to retire it until further notice.

In another part of the New Earth, war was beginning. It raged on between Phoenix and Kushiyama. Things had been bad diplomatically, so Phoenix sent a diplomatic unit guarded by soldiers to smooth things out. However, things only became worse when a black man in Kushiyama, an Atticus Crispy, had been pelted by rocks by some visiting soldiers from Phoenix. Regular citizens got involved, and rioting took place everywhere.

Well, everywhere but a few places. Hinata managed to stay out of the conflict because they were protected by treaty as a tourist town, unless they did something like attack other countries. Heaven of course because of its holy protection, and Hell also was not attacked because it was too hot for armored troops and nobody wanted to go there anyway. There were a few countries that managed to stay out because they were in the middle of nowhere and nobody wanted anything from them (like Gruumi), or were so heavily defended and self-sufficient that they basically could go on as if nothing had changed (Aiken Monastery was left alone), but strangest of all was Opening. Opening was a valuable town, with trained military who could be convinced to changed sides for enough money, and even some farms and merchants to supply resources. Troops stormed there ready to raid Opening for all it was worth, but as soon as they got anywhere near, wind storms knocked their air troops away, and thick vines pulled troops back. Those attacking survived, but were so shaken that they simply retreated. Soon, many troops would refuse orders to take Opening.

This was a total war so anything went. Traders often gave away wood or blankets that spread disease when used. What was left of the stock market after the New Earth wasn't terribly substantial, but bankers would buy low and then sell suddenly to screw with the market, or buy massive shares of markets controlled by the other country to gain 51% shares. Fighters came from all over with bows and swords and all sorts of armor and shields. Alchemists built golems wielding weapons that the Council frowned upon, and used elemental alchemy to wreak massive destruction. The same was true of the wonder-workers, offensive wizards flung lightning or fire or ice around. Clerics healed and revived troops, and necromancers sent forth zombies. There was even rumored to be instances of using cosmic energy (what was formerly called nuclear energy, but this also included the use of magic to produce cleaner radiation) as wonder-workers gathered in groups of thirteen to use mass destruction ritual magic. Some soldiers even posed as "refugees," dressing in poor quality clothing and demanding amnesty. They would later find their way to transportation golems and drive them into crowded areas, use bombs to destroy buildings, collect massive amounts of government services to collapse the government, or simply outwork the citizens resulting in poverty and starvation for the citizens. The conflict was to last for years. In order to restore order, a Council was needed. But none existed at the moment, or would for the next few years.

NEVRAS

The Council had fallen. I had heard the news on returning to Kirin. As we tried to move north, our little group was thwarted by troops stationed at the mountain pass. We had to head south again, and since Kirin's port was also blocked, we wandered towards the nearest port, a small fishing dock in a remote portion of the continent.

We were adrift. Aside from Kirin, we were in the middle of nowhere and it was becoming cold. Not that we could really freeze to death with Ambrosia's passive defenses against the environment, but it was still uncomfortable. We went inside the tent to stay inside our party town for the night, but when the morning came, it was just as cold as ever. The party town provided us with cheap rations of grain-bean buns, yet we needed

real food. We gathered some wood and built a fire in the snow. It was damp, and hard to maintain, but gradually the land dried enough that we could maintain the fire. And maintain we did. I used my impossibly sharp obsidian-edged blade to slice through nearby trees, chop off thick logs, and I kept feeding the fire. We only had to find some sort of animal to cook. I sent Aqorm off to hunt something, but before she could leave, a bunny ran up and jumped into the fire. By the time it was salvaged, it was already cooked. Seriously, that was some Osamu Tesuka stuff.

After a very light meal, considering the size of our group (Aqorm decided not to eat , on account of getting freaked out), we continued on. Our path was blocked by a Heart Eater. It resembled not much more than a giant scaled ovoid mass with a mouth similar to that of a lamprey. The circular maw had more rows of teeth than I cared to deal with right now, but thankfully it couldn't move. We could just walk away from this stationary creature... only, as we tried to walk away, we just got closer. I noticed it was breathing in, and a fair amount of air appeared to be getting sucked in. Uh oh.

Thinking quickly, I used one of my techniques in an unorthodox way. You see, my techniques are more than just attacks. I can use the Wave Thrust for digging and tilling soil. The Speed Slash was good for chopping vegetables up. The Dragon Roar technique, well... I guess you could use it to demolish houses. In any case, the Vacuum Slice could create lethally sharp slice by using Void energy to remove sections of a creature, but I could also alter this to a technique known as Vacuum Spin. This produced a hole that could suck small creatures in. It usually was worthless in battle, except for getting rid of creatures smaller than a cat, and I had to stay still while using it, but for the purposes of this use, it was sufficient. The two vacuums canceled each other out, despite the mouth of the Heart Eater being much larger. “Everyone stand behind me!” I shouted. They did as they were told. The vortex was constant, so I maintained my own vacuum, although I could feel myself gradually getting tired. The creature didn't sit quietly though.

It screamed, breaking the vortex for the barest second, an attack loosely called a Wave of Destruct. This effect created a harsh vibration. I started bleeding internally. I had just enough time to dodge out of the way before it also shook the ground in our direction. I was spent, and I was bleeding from the lungs to the kidneys, and even after Elias healed the lot of us from massive damage, I had enough physical trauma that I needed to sit down for a bit. If Elias had been weaker in his healing, I would have died instantly as liver and spleen damage filled my system with toxins, but he quickly followed up the healing with anti-venom techniques. Despite being fully healed, this sort of treatment put strain on my body, so I would understandably need a rest. The others attacked or used magic for quite awhile, but the creature had thick skin and it was taking awhile. Attack after attack the beastie took, but it gave about as bad as it got. The creatures in this land... This wasn't even a boss creature but a wandering beast, but look how strong it was! Seeing damage wasn't doing much good against the rugged thing, and wondering just when Elias would become just as I was, Ambrosia started with her whole martial arts dance routine. This one was a different one from before. It must be the Crest of Thanatos.

CHAPTER 19

In which Ambrosia's group suddenly realizes they have been traveling without a map.

AMBROSIA

This was indeed part of the Crest of Thanatos. I moved my hands around gradually forward, a move called Fan Through The Back. The Heart Eater withered and collapsed.

I did not mind killing creatures, but... well lemme put it this way. I hunt. I fish. I forage. There's something honest about the effort of earning food. Killing humans, well, I don't eat them so it's kinda murder. There's something very sad about watching animals just fall over without a fight. It makes me feel kinda like the family pet or the old milk cow just left us. Even though the family pet just attempted to kill us.

And yet, when we boarded the ship and made out into the open seas, the same thing wound up happening to the sea beasts. As we faced krakens, sea serpents, and even Nessie's relatives, we got a ton of small treasures from raiding the creatures of their skin

or bones, or internal organs. I would later sell these at the next town, making a ton of money. Although, the meat was no good, because the same magic that killed these beasts instantly also made their flesh rot extremely quickly. But I was devastated, trapped in a pit of depression. I sat on the boat, head down, ignoring the others. So deep was my guilt and sadness that I barely noticed when a giant sea snail headed towards the ship. Startled, I froze completely. I didn't wanna destroy such a fine creature.

Nevras saw me sitting down in a kinda gloomy funk. “Are you okay?” he asked. I shook my head, “How can you guys keep doing this?” He looked puzzled, “Doing what?” I pointed to the snail, which they were currently whacking to get to empty its guts because snail should not be eaten if was filled with nasty stuff. “You know,” I said, “this. Fighting critters, day in and day out. It's exhausting. And it never seems to end.” Nevras said, “You remember when I was on the bridge at Phoenix, and there was that troll, and I just chopped it up?” This sounded vaguely familiar, “Yeah...” He asked, “Why do you think I did this? Because I was mad, right?” I didn't know where he was going with this, so I agreed. But it was to be a trick question, “By the Eight Immortals, no! I didn't feel anything at all. And that scared me more than anything. That I could be so cold to a big creature like that, which if I were to be honest, probably just needed money for food. But it wasn't really about that critter. It was about what was happening with me. I was worried the whole time about meeting my dad after so long, and having my folks judge me. That troll just happened to cross me when I was already upset, and it was nothing personal, but something was on my mind. You know? So, what's worrying you now? I mean, it's good that you're concerned about saving the critters, but it seems more than that.” The others had succeeded in getting the snail to empty its guts, now they were feeding it large quantities of grain. I continued to sit and watch, while my life played out for me. I'd never met my real dad, my mom had to give me up for some reason, and the foster people I could call my parents, “They died...” I sobbed, while Nevras asked, “Hmmm?” I straightened up. I wasn't gonna be great during this battle, but I would help. Well, actually, I didn't know what to do either, since they clearly had a plan, so I just yelled, “Yay! Good job you guys! Give me an S-N-A-I-L! What does that spell?”

My friends, studied as they were in the fine art of French cooking, knew exactly what to do. Raiding some of the supplies that came with the ship, they tossed massive amounts of butter, and enough salt to give it some flavor (but not so much to shrivel it up like a slug), and fresh herbs. Azrael and Zoe used Fire spells, while Elias tried alchemy to burn the water itself. Greek Fire, he called it. In time, the nicely cooked snail was escargot, and we cut it into strips for later. Of course, the journey wasn't to be quite so smooth.

Before, we had been riding ships paid for at the dock, and charted by other people. And the first time we had used this boat, we just navigated along the coastline. But now, we were navigating on the open seas. Elias is brilliant, but without a compass, map, sextant, and the like, we were pretty much lost. Oh sure, it's romantic to think of navigating by the stars. But to navigate requires pretty much knowing where the island is. As it was, the stars did point us north, but we were going to a specific island west of us.

We drifted for days, getting swept aside wherever the wind and the sea took us. Beginning in the southern region of the Eastern Continent near Kirin, we headed due west but the sharp winds pushed us north to a strange island. Stacking our food and other belongings ashore, we tied our ship firmly to the crude makeshift anchor.

The island was rugged and wild, filled with all kinds of scrubs and shrubberies. The rocky shore got rockier, until finally it ended in a sharp cliff on all sides. From the looks of it, the rock formed a sort of wall against lower plateau. It appeared natural, but something was weird about it, so I decided to look more closely. On the rock was the symbol of my Crest! Below this, I read the inscription, «Only the Oracle of Tao's touch can open this path.» Hmmm, we had better remember this island. In any case, we returned to our ship and weren't much better off.

NEVRAS

After the snail, and the feast that followed, I tried to make time to spend with Ambrosia. As we were drinking and partying, it was too loud to properly talk to her. After waiting for about two hours, I finally poked her on the shoulder, motioning her outside.

“What's up?” she asked. I fully intended to tell her that it had been awhile since we had properly spent any time together, since we had even bothered to talk properly. I knew well the cause, we were in a rush to finish our quest, but still I wanted to at least have a good chat. I got as far as, “Hey, I've been thinking, it's been awhile since...” before I got splashed in the face with a high wave. The ship rocked, and the moment passed as I tried to catch my bearings. She didn't even ask me what I wanted to talk about, and I was so frustrated, I wouldn't remember it anyway. The wind was pushing us off course.

After we had headed to west some more, the wind sharply blew us off course again, and we found ourselves near the desert island that is Seikai and Goji. Remembering some of the boat trips we took, we tried heading north but just as we saw the island we were looking for in the distance, a violent storm came up.

ELIAS

It was a dark and stormy night. Torrential rains slapped from the bow and stern to well into the quarterdeck and the waist of the ship. Concerned about taking on water, I ordered all entries closed from the portholes to the top hatches. Aqorm carried this out, because of all of us, she was by far the fastest. We had just finished bailing any water from the deck when suddenly the winds changed again. Knowing what I did about barometric pressure, I didn't like the looks of this storm. The high and low temperatures kept shifting, and I suspected a hurricane. Our ship itself was built sturdy, with ironwood (also known as *lignum vitae*) reinforcement even though the wood was heavy enough to slightly affect its ability to float, so I had no doubt our ship itself would survive. But it was a matter of our survival, so I ordered everyone to head below deck. A strong storm, I might advise being tied to the deck, but not a hurricane. I trusted the deck to hold up.

Below deck, we sat in relative darkness while above us the wind howled, the rain pelted the deck monsoon-style, and the entire structure rocked back and forth. I had checked, the ship was built sturdy, if there was a weak point at all, it was that in order make the ship an effective sailboat...

Sure enough. The mast of the boat, in order for the ship to be lightweight to actually move with the wind, had to be made from a less solid wood. This was the other reason I didn't tie anyone to the mast. From my research into the materials, I fully expected it to be the first thing to go. A sharp crack above, and it went tumbling toward the deck. “*Protect Building*!” Azrael called, which appeared to generally consider this ship by that definition. A thin film about the color of plastic wrap (that is to say, clear) enveloped the ship, protecting it from the sudden weight of the mast. The ship was safe. For the next few hours however, the storm raged hard enough to shift the mast from the center where it fell, to port, to starboard, and back and forth for the duration of the event. At last, the wind settled. The ship was at rest.

Opening the hatch, we examined the damage. Thankfully, damage to the deck itself wasn't... extensive, but the deck was a mess. We spent the better part of the day organizing things that had been knocked around or smashed or shredded by the fierce storms, tossing out barrels or crates of food that had been waterlogged or the wood had rotted, throwing out some of the food itself that had been ruined by salty water, eating some of it regardless, and storing some in the cargo hold below in case of another storm.

No such storm came, however. In fact, no weather, aside from hot sun and gentle gales, happened for the next week or so. This was good and bad, you see, for it gave us ample time to repair our ship, but while we saw the nearby island about seven miles away while the sky was clear, short of getting out and pushing we were stuck. With still winds and no mast, we weren't going anywhere. It looked like the first order of business, then, was to repair the mast.

Perhaps you readers of this log are under the impression that because magic exists, it can readily repair things like a large pillar of wood snapping. I am afraid that I must disillusion you people, for things are not as they seem in those fantasy genre novels. This is real life, after all.

Strictly speaking, there are roughly two ways to repair a mast, short of getting a spare mast out. Using magic, the average person can repair a mast as easily as a severed limb, by joining together the sections and using a Reunite prayer. …I am certain you can see

the problem here, already. Not only must the two pieces be fit together correctly (which in this case was already a problem, since the wood broke in a jagged pattern) but there was the small matter of pulling out what remained of the mast, and once repaired, pulling it back up and inserting it where it originally was, with a crew of only six people. Of course, there was the other way, which was to simply reverse time, but this only really worked for human events. For natural events, you had to either selectively reverse time, or worry about the mast breaking again anyway. And besides which, we had no sorcerer to reverse time, selectively or otherwise.

We wound up recutting the mast so it was straight, then assembling the frayed shards together and reuniting them, then uniting that to the mast itself as it lay on the ground. Since we didn't have a way of pulling the bottom of the mast out ourselves, we slowly chopped thin circles of wood and carried each into position, reuniting them there. What I would have liked to have done was the exact reverse of this, moving the mast back into position a bit at a time. However, the sail at the top of the mast was at least 20 ft above the ground, probably closer to 30. None of us had magic powerful enough to exceed what our bodies themselves could lift by that wide a margin, much less to hold such objects aloft for that height. We needed a different solution.

As we now had an intact mast, Ambrosia used her super-strength to boost the mast to a somewhat vertical position. She wasn't strong enough to move it, but she held it up diagonally with both hands. This was a good start of course, but not enough to move it into position. Aqorm used geomancy with the wooden boat to draw up wood energy enough to create vines. Zoe also used her magic to make vines, and with the help of some good yanks, we got the mast upright. But it took effort from all of us to scoot it into position. Eventually, we had a mast back together, and we tried to head toward the island. But it was more difficult than I thought.

The Divine Border is not really a single island, as I described it. Rather, as we got closer, it became increasingly clear that there were actually two islands here. One was an island surrounded on most sides by cliffs and rocks, aside from one small entrance blocked by a border. Above that island, however, is an island made not of soil but apparently solid cloud. This was the island of Heaven. I had read many theories on how exactly the cloud held together, but I honestly I had no clear idea.

As we approached the island, we noticed that the tide was in reverse of its normal pattern. Normally, as you readers are familiar with the beach will know, tide travels from the ocean to the shore. But this rocky island beat the large sailing ship with waves, pushing it back before it could get closer. The wind itself pushed us away, the closer we got to the island. What a mysterious place.

GOD

The island of Heaven was formed under unique circumstances. As you may know, the worlds in this universe are made of all manner of strange things. Planets of ice, planets of gas, even dark planets like TrES-2b, all of these are made from various forces pushing matter together in such a way that it remains in one piece. Planets are not all round, some are flat, some are even square. There is an image in people's heads that all planets must be the same shape, but some planets are made of diamond or actually on fire or orbiting backwards, so nahhh...

Elias, despite his research of many books, has only a small amount of understanding of the rules of science of long ago. He could probably tell you some about electromagnetism, but not about cohesion and surface tension. I made the land of this area by playing with such forces. By altering the normal molecular structure of these water and air molecules, I made clouds that are thick and solid enough to walk on, which had a spongy texture. I called this Water III, because I had already made water that you humans know of with its tendency to turn into ice. But there was also Water II in the planet of Alpha Septim 38x, with its reddish tone and tendency to boil at much lower temperature. I gave this island its own exertion on the tides of the land below it. I gradually added some rock and minerals and plants to sit above this cloudy water, so that the inhabitants of this land could mine and could farm using techniques of hydroponics, since these clouds were rich with not only water but nitrogen and a number of other

nutrients. They grew crops under my guidance, they made weapons to sell to others and to defend their borders, and gradually this land, cut off from the outside world became a land where the inhabitants lived peacefully, high above the rest of the New Earth.

You may notice that I said “inhabitants” not “people.” For the people of Heaven are the Seraphim and the common angels. Before you start visualizing men and women with feathery wings, allow me to stop you there. Angels and demons, strictly speaking, are Nephilim. They were once one race. Long ago, angels looked more like three-headed six-winged beings with faces of lions or eagles or the like. Or they looked like a giant wheel with eyes. Or they looked like things beyond my ability to effectively explain without dedicating paragraphs of this story just describing one feature. In human form, they looked like beautiful yet frightening men or women with prismatic wings, long tails, halos, and eyes that could see anything. The point is, at one period, humans were in regular contact with these pure-blooded angels known as Seraphim. This is is distinct from archangels, but we'll get to that later.

Humans at first were frightened of balls of flame and giant horrifying beings. But gradually, fear gave way to another emotion. You see, there are half-elves, half-dwarves, half-gnomes, etc. This is for a reason. Humans are massively horny, and will have sex with anything, no matter how weird or frightening. In fact, sometimes *because* of it. The humans mated with the Seraphim, so what we now call angels are their offspring. Some of these remained in heaven, but others used their Script in a way that wasn't right, granting selfish whims in return for favor. This created issues in the world I had made, for there were beings who had Knowledge of Good and Evil, but also had immortality and the gift of the Script. The Script is the ability to to alter reality with words.

Even though the Script was often misused, this was not nearly as much a threat as eternity mixed with the Knowledge. For with Knowledge of Good and Evil, humans could deem their lives good or bad, and live in a state of Sin, not understanding that life was actually both good *and* evil. And they would be stuck in that state, with no exit. This would be like being punished forever, and I didn't want this.

And so, while this cloud island had originally sat just above the waves, I lifted it high out of reach, causing a massive Flood in the process. Each angel today, except for the Fallen or the Seraphim, has an angelic counterpart. That is because I split these hybrids into angels and demons, giving angels Knowledge of Good while their demonic half got Knowledge of Evil. These altered the land where they lived, making Heaven a wonderful place, while Hell... well, it wasn't as nice. There aren't too many Fallen left though, most of those angels that rebelled against God were dealt with by Michael. They exist now only as summoned beings, having lost their physical bodies.

The island of Heaven now exerts a defensive tidal reaction, where water moves away from the island wherever humans get too close. Only the dead are allowed entry into Heaven, and should someone somehow get past the barrier of wind and water around the island, they still couldn't enter alive without a Divine Passport. Protecting the virginity of any remaining Seraphim was top priority.

AMBROSIA

The winds and waters howled around our ship. Every time we tried to get closer, we got slapped back by a massive wave. We tried circling the island to find some method of entry, but it didn't seem to matter. It was like the island had a giant arm that was grabbing the ship and moving it backwards.

After some planning, we tried splitting the party, and swimming towards shore in different directions. But as soon as we got close enough, some sort of mini-geysers tossed us safely back on the boat. Hmmm, something told me this wasn't just a simply tide thing.

As most people know about me, I'm not really inclined toward studying. I'm not an idiot or anything, but I tend to save the whole keen analytical stuff for Elias and Azrael. And yet, what was happening was weird and nothing they had likely read about. So I just sat and watched as the ship was driven back. I looked carefully at how the bottom of the wave started at one spot, and appeared to spiral *around* the island, rather than away as I initially thought. I tried to imagine this as one big hand sweeping around the island and found my hands were loosely mimicking the Brush Knee Twist Step from Alexander's

Crest. So, I tried doing the movements, without really trying to use my trigram tattoo, just the clean motions of turning slowly while moving. The wind that I felt nearby started to change, and the trigrams started to glow. Suddenly, rather than the waves being around the island, the waves circled around the ship itself. I was kinda scared.

The ship kept moving forward, while the water spiraling around it kept edging back. I kept shifting my hands, even though they were becoming awfully tired. Aqorm and Elias steered the sailboat and managed the sails. Nevras sat near me and watched, while the others just looked at everything happening. The water and wind moved steadily back until the ship was on dry land. We tied our ship securely before I finally stopped moving my hands and legs. I was tired, so I sat down for awhile before rejoining the others.

Ahead was a long and winding road up a rocky shore. Fisherman of a type I had never seen before had nets and harpoons and were scooping up their lot in baskets. From the looks of it, none of these were human. Nearby, some merfolk were trading their catch with some others. It was clear the merfolk were the ones who had done the trading, yet this beings seemed to have no trouble paying. There were men and women with wings reaching down to their lower back with white wings. There were creatures, I guess I'd put it, that filled me with terror to look at, for they had too many wings, or heads, or eyes. Some of them had eyes where no eyes should be. Some were nude, and some it didn't seem to matter for their bodies were shrouded in fire or darkness or some kind of strange energy. Some just looked like balls of light with no features at all.

We wound up making some decent Gold selling our aforementioned large sea beast parts to them. They didn't have much use for the dead meat, as I say, but the skins they seemed would fetch a nice price, and they apparently wanted them in order to make clothing. The angels (?) traded with us, and it was then that I noticed they didn't appear to have any kind of common currency with us. Rather than some Gold coins of different values, as most people used, they had some diary that they tore pages out of. “Okay,” I said, “I'm not really sure I can do anything with this...” The merfolk, noticing my blank stare, whispered something to the nearest angel. A ball of light materialized a small notebook and “handed” it to me (without the use of actual hands, of course). The mermaid explained, “This is a Record of Value. The Nephilim believe it is sinful to handle human currency, so they devised their own. Angels use these books to pay others, and accept payment. Watch.” She pulled out a feather pen, and scrawled out the words, «A Value of 100, for A Gift, to _____ » and after a moment my name appeared within the blank. She pulled pulled a section of the page from the book, and stuck it at the front page of my book. It stuck into the book as a page, as if sewn and glued on. “Huh? How did...?” I said.

The mermaid explained, “These books are specifically designed to handle money. Each page is a day's money, divided up into however many parts an angel needs. It's kinda like tearing a check from a checkbook, only it's basically their currency. Non-angels who hold this book can either tear out sections of this page to give to angels for something costing 100 Value, or we can write our own. You try. You just write the amount in Value, then whether it is for A Gift/Services Rendered/Goods Bought, then to _____. The book will know the identity and circumstances of the exchange, and will change based on circumstances. If you receive a gift, then tear out a slip to pay for a good, it will change what it says.” She handed me a pen, and said, “Pick out any fish we're selling. Write how much you'll pay,” and she told us the market price for her fish, “then it does the rest.” I wrote «20 in value, for Goods Bought, to _____ » and the page gave her name as Alethia Skyscale. I was confused, “But... how does that work as a valid monetary system? I mean, I'm basically writing checks that I can't cash.” Alethia shook her head, “Well, non-angels can use either the sheets that are already given or ones they write themselves, but normally only angels will accept them as currency. But banks can convert it to other money, because of a deal with God.” I was curious, “Oh? What deal is that?” The merfolk critter explained, “The deal where they don't get struck dead by lightning for devaluing angelic currency. Here, this was a freebie for demonstration. From now on, though, you'd probably not want to pay us in anything but Gold. We accept Value from angels, but we can't use it much until we convert it to our money. On the other hand, check the front page.” I looked at the inside cover, «No angel is allowed to Value

themselves, nor their own work, nor the price of their merchandise. An angel who writes a Value in this book shall hereby be punished by God with pain.» She explained, “You see? The angels accept our Value because we give Value to them, whether we can cover it or not. Since they cannot price goods on their own, how much we have is irrelevant, because the higher something is valued, the more they work with.” Well, that did sound like the money system technically worked. But... “wouldn't people try to lowball them? I mean, something might have cost thousands of hours to make and they charge like 10 for it.” She shook her head, “That wouldn't work. Angels often work in stores where 'marketing consultants' price the goods for them. But also... this spear took about 100 hours to forge. Try pricing it at lower that the number of hours.” I did, and before I could finish writing, the 1 Value item that I priced suddenly jumped up to 100 Value. It *knew.* “I... see...” I said.

After thanking the merfolk for their help, they swam away, having done their business for today anyway. The angels appeared to have a few strange seeds, but the minimum value that I thought to offer seemed to rise to absurd numbers, thanks to the countless hours spent trying to make whatever these things were bear fruit. Although it was no trouble in terms of what I could afford thanks to some weird monetary rules, the idea of paying that much for seeds that I wasn't sure I'd be able to plant right now, still seemed too expensive. We continued on, assuring them that we'd check out their shops later.

Ahead of us, the Divine Border office building came into view, to the left of which had a mountain pass guarded with imposing types, soldiers in gold armor stood at ready. They didn't appear to be guarding closely, but as we tried to pass, we figured out why. A solid barrier bonked into us as we moved ahead. The guards laughed at us, and explained that nobody could pass, not no how, not unless they had a passport.

We checked again at the office. As border buildings went, normally one expects a rigid concrete building with all kinds of special glass. But this appeared to be a building made of straw. And yet, whatever this straw was made from, it was clearly something I couldn't exactly huff and puff and blow down. It was firmly framed, from the roof down.

The inside of the border office was surprising, for it had high quality granite flooring and stiff metal frame. An old grandfather clock stood in the right corner, next to a water basin of wood and marble, with an old style sink. In the center of the room, a stove billowed up smoke through a chimney. Over towards the left corner sat a shelf of very old books, some of which appeared to be from before the New Earth. I decided not to read these as I didn't want to break my mind. There were two tables perpendicular to each other to form a crude counter. One table had a man behind it who looked official signing and stamping paperwork. The other was filled with particularly large materials. On this one sat a world map written by fine runes which was currently displaying the inside of this exact building (obviously it would show the world once we got outside), and an extremely large book titled *The Eternity Epic*. Aqorm told the official, “Look behind you!” While his back was turned, she escaped with a copy of the world map. The official, an angel dressed in long black outfit and one of those funny hats favored by the Koreans of old (Elias called these *durumagi* and *tanggeon* but I didn't know which was which), sighed, looking miffed at being tricked by such an obvious ruse, but shrugged and put up another map. As we had yet to approach him for anything, he simply continued his work. I looked at the other item on the table.

“Don't touch that!” said Zoe. I ignored her. Something about that book was very interesting. As I tried, and failed, to lift this book from its spot I realized this was arguably too much book for me. I opened and found that it was far bigger than it looked on the table, almost like the number of pages was infinite. As I started reading, I realized there was a strong pull to keep reading, and I hung on to every word. I read, «The war in Isis raged on for decades, but one man dared to tell the generals to lay down their arms. The man's name was actually never recorded, but later generations referred to him as Zhanshi Xianzhe, loosely translated as the Sage warrior. According to common accounts, when the warriors refused to surrender, Xianzhe simply touched their weapons, turning them into flowers. In a neighboring village, a young girl was learning her craft from a local herbalist. Carefully pounding fresh willow bark with ripened juniper berries with the mortar and pestle, she rubbed a poultice on the leg of the wounded soldier brought to

her humble abode. Carefully, she leeched the toxins and taint of the cold iron lodged in his femur, creating life where before there was death. As one growing up in a small town, she had no reason to think that she would be anything more than a healer, but hers was a love to last for all time... »

Ten hours later, I had gotten to a really good part, as the two had finally met after lots of near meetings and plot twists and turns. I won't give away everything, surely you'll want to read it yourself! I read, «Xianzhe looked up from his reverie, to find a woman staring back at him. Her face was attractive to look at, yet which spoke of a kindness beyond simple beauty. Here was a woman with a beautiful soul, and her hands, calloused with the effort of pressing herbs into rubs and powders, showed her love with every touch. And her name, her name was Reqing Mei, meaning beautiful spirit. » I said with astonishment, “I can't believe it took so long to introduce her!” Zoe explained, “The ancient people believed a name should not be given lightly, as it could define and control the person giving it. They believed names have power.” She explained to me about true names while I continued to read the epic.

A day later, I had gotten near the end of their story, but the book seemed to be barely started. It was so sad, she had spent her life together and raised five children, but now they were both dying. I continued reading, «The once great Sage was lying at the bedside, his powerful magic having failed him when he would have bargained for health and vitality. He had experienced a rich life, and he knew that death would likely bring a separation from his beloved. That was something he could not cope with. He knew the state of life and death, as it was the business of a Sage to know. Death would not be the ending of this story, as all creatures renewed their bodies, casting them off like clothing to be changed when the time was right. But, he knew too that with death came the erasure of memory, for no person could know too much of matters that lie Beyond The World. Thus, he could not bear the thought of forgetting the one who had cared for his heart, like she had cared for the sick, those many years ago. He had thought a Sage, with such wisdom as he had, would not need things like love, but he had been wrong about a great many things. A Sage, it turned out, had all the greater power because of love, for the cosmos relied on connection between concepts. As such, he was a sage because he had a heart capable of such love, and of taking this love in return. As his dying breath, he gasped out a wish to the heavens. Xianzhe wished that he could remember everything and that his Mei could remember him, and they would be reborn for all eternity... »

Zoe suddenly slammed the book. Just as it was getting good too! I pulled out my knife and waved it around while the others held behind my shoulders. I wasn't being unreasonable, I tell you! It is completely sane to start brandishing a weapon over a book! “Ambrosia, stop it! You'll die if you keep reading. You haven't slept in days, and I imagine you've forgotten what day it even is reading this book.” She was right. In fact, I had to check my calendar to also know what month it was. It had all run together.

I looked at her. There were tears in her eyes. “The book ends after those two live thousands of lifetimes together, and it keeps adding to their story each time they are reincarnated. That book... It has killed many of my friends. They tried to read it, but kept reading and reading without sleep, without eating, and without drinking anything. Only I managed to finish it.” The pain on her face was plain. “But it gets worse,” she said, “each of those people mentioned in the book? They're **my** reincarnations! Mine and Azrael's. We spent each time trying to meet each other, only to have something interfere! Sometimes we were siblings, sometimes we were the same sex and couldn't have a family, sometimes there was an age difference. If we tried to get together, a jealous lover would prevent our relationship. Or there was an arranged marriage. We never managed to make things work out, even with all our trying!” She burst into tears. I spent the rest of the afternoon consoling her, all while trying to resist the pull of this novel.

At long last, we finally managed to talk to the official about securing our papers. “Ahem?” I said in such a way that it sounder like a question, “Can you help us?” The man, insufferable to the core said, “I don't know, can I?” I glared at him, “May you help us? We want to enter the path behind this place. I'm the Oracle and I have a mission that requires...” He cut me off, “I'm sure your mission is very important, but as a general rule, you're gonna have to die before I let you in. So, as interesting as I'm sure your story is,

frankly, I don't give a damn." Rude! I tried a different tactic, "But... could you make any kind of exception? Could I prove myself or could I work really hard or could I..." He shook his head. "Look, I like you and all. But, do you understand Grace at all? You can't earn your way into Heaven. I have to decide whether I grant your entry, you can't just push and push and hope for things to come out all right." I frowned, "So could you? I mean, I kinda need to finish my quest and can't exactly go in without talking to God." He appeared thoughtful, then he said, "Alright, I'll tell you what. You know that castle you passed by just outside Kushiyama? You'll need to go there, and you'll need to bring back the heads of the creature cursing this place. I might consider it then." Wait, but he just said Grace can't be earned? So ummm, why so much effort on this quest?

Then I started thinking about all of the effort involved in getting here, but now we were traveling back. Noooooooo...!!! Thankfully, he saw my look and nodded. "Don't worry, look," he walked us outside to a peculiar circle, much like the one I had seen earlier, near the church in Kushiyama, "this is a teleportation circle. Science tried to make one of these long ago, but succeeded only in the monstrous practice of human faxing. They'd take the rough data of a person, then clone them on the other side." Seeing my horrified expression, he patted my shoulder, "Relax! This was made from thaumaturgy. It simply turns you into a ball of light, then sends you to an area where you've already visited. Just think hard about where you want to go." I waited for some of the others to go, watching their bodies turn into a ball of light, then fly at high speed to the destination. "Don't worry," said the border guard, "I'll make sure the ship is safely moored. It won't go anywhere." This was not what I was worried about.

I felt a warm hand on mine. Nevras said, "Relax, we'll step on the platform together. Okay?" I nodded, "That sounds good... but only if you go first." I snuck behind him and pushed. "Ambrosia, you heartless bi...." I heard him say this as he turned into a ball of light and rocketed across the land. Yeah, nobody's gonna make me do this, I'll stay right...

… Here, was what I was going to say, but Zoe grabbed me around the waist and dragged me in. The teleportation experience is, well an experience. I'd not tried it before, as I'd never cast any spells but my fear was basically erased. If you've never teleported before, I'd definitely recommend it. I'll probably be first in line rather than having to be pushed. It may be hard to describe, but I'll try. You turn your entire body into light, and anyone standing close to you also joins, so you connect to form a ball of energy, instead of two separate balls like you'd think. That's what anyone watching this would see.

Watching it, and being part of it, though, are two entirely different things. You see, while an onlooker just saw the two of us become one big ball of light, I felt free of my body completely. It was like being naked, only more profound, because I no longer worried about how much or little I weighed, my hair being messy, or anything like this. I could see in incredible detail and in high speed everything around like we were flying slowly. I saw the mountains, the water, and the forests, at the same time I saw clouds above. Everything was so intense and vivid that I wondered why I had ever wanted a body. And the intimacy! It was like Zoe and I were *inside* of each other. Yeah, like that, only way better. I felt her close to me, and I felt her memories. All of those former lives, and I knew she saw my past too. Yet somehow since we weren't locked by our bodies, it no longer felt sad. Zoe was definitely a friend I would want to share everything with, and I would want to live close by to her if I ever built a house. We were now BFFs.

CHAPTER 20

In which Ambrosia decides to take Nevras into a haunted house, or something.

ZOE

I got a little more of Ambrosia's past than even she remembers. I have experienced past lives so I know some freaky stuff.

For instance, the Earth is round, but not in the way we understand it. You'd call my model "flat" I suppose. Contrary to popular opinion, the Earth is not constantly spinning at high speed, as people definitely would be able to feel this. With barely any wind speed, a feather or leaf floats away, yet somehow it ignores this high speed. We are told

this is an illusion, that the sun actually stays still, and we orbit it, but not one person feel motion sick, when they would be sensitive to far lower speeds. And then there's the tidal lock of the moon despite Earth supposedly rotating much faster, and the sun and moon appearing the same size despite being at different distances and vastly different sizes. The idea of gravity is that it's some magical force that not only holds an atmosphere in place during all of this supposed movement (ignoring multiple laws of friction, momentum, velocity, and so on because “gravity”), but also allows people to stand upside-down in the lower hemisphere. What we call gravity is actually just the density of objects compared to the air (similar to how buoyancy works in water). It can be overridden by wind pressure pushing light objects into the air temporarily, other forces like magnetism, or attractive forces between objects. Gravity and a round Earth is often used to explain how water can cling to a convex surface, but it simply doesn't work since water would naturally drip down the surface if it were round, as it would washing the bottom skillet or pan. And then there's the fact that after six months, not only would there be completely different stars in each hemisphere (and this would happen often in the amount of time between this), not only would rotation on the axis mean no hemisphere had a monopoly on any group of stars, but after six months an area in which the time is noon would look more like midnight because it would be facing the wrong direction). All of these things are things I found out by remembering my reincarnations. But don't tell people. It's a secret from everyone.

As for how it works... The surface has mountains and valleys and deep oceans, but the poles are on the east and west. It resembles a circle to casual observers, having a northern and southern hemisphere, but actually it is more like a open waffle press, with two parts connected in the middle from north to south. These two hemispheres are somewhat flat discs, each having a dome (or firmament) on top for atmosphere. The sun and moon under this model are roughly the same size but not the same mass or energy. The sun and the moon are far closer than you might think, not light years but inside our atmosphere! This is why our puny eyes cannot see past the horizon even on an ideal day, yet somehow can see something light years away. As for the stars, they aren't really stars at all but pinprick holes in the firmament which gradually rotates each hemisphere, producing a different set of stars for each hemisphere. I have no idea if space travel is real, but since I always reincarnated as a human, there was little need to explore outside the Earth, so I wasn't sure if distant planets were there. All I saw though outside Earth was a mass of white empty space, so I doubt it. Maybe those green aliens are from other dimensions? The sun and moon simply rotate overhead, and watching them from an angle gives the impression that either the Earth is turning or the sun and moon orbit around the whole Earth (actually, we are seeing the bottom of the moon not its front). From my observations, the sun of the New Earth moves north to south, swinging gradually between the two hemispheres so while it is day in one, the other would be night. The moon is heavier than the water so it creates a pull that causes tides, while water is heavier than the air so it typically doesn't leave the ground except as vapor. You see the moon mainly during the night, because the glare from the sun prevents other lights from showing, in the same way as turning on the lights in a car makes it difficult to see outside the car during certain times of day. Likewise, the phases of the moon were nonexistent because while normally in such case the sun cast shadow on the moon as they were both orbiting along the same lines, this moon actually orbited at a 90º angle from the sun, going from east to west then circling back east to west in the southern hemisphere. This meant that the two rarely crossed or eclipsed because their timing was different. And by rarely, I meant it almost had to be induced by a powerful ritual.

This firmament separates the world we see from the world outside our perceptions. This meant for the seasons, if you've ever seen a pendulum going in a line, it gradually changes position until it hits all points in a circle. Similarly, the sun as it rotates around the Earth, at certain points shifts closer to the northern edges producing hot weather there, while at other points it swings closer to the southern edges. It also meant the way things worked was very half-baked. You see, unlike a truly round disc, east is to the right, west is to the left, north is toward northern edge, south is toward the southern edge, and of course you can walk in a narrow space between hemispheres. But since this is not widely

known, maps show a version of the New Earth with no hemispheric bridge, meaning it is possible when going east or west to fall off the Earth, as well as missing the bridge when going north or south. To say nothing of gardeners or construction types digging too deep and falling through. I bet you didn't know that, huh? Yup, those crazy Flat Earth types are the only sane ones.

The point is, we can't ever be sure we know what we know, because we could be wrong. I'm sure those with a perception of Earth as round and moving can make tests to say that their notions are right. They aren't though, because I saw it.

When you enter the Afterlife, you leave the Earth and indeed this mortal universe. Humans are supposed to forget this, but I swore to secrecy in return for retaining my memory. But this is probably by last incarnation once I finish this quest, so screw it. I kept this secret for centuries even from Azrael, so when I saw the truth about Ambrosia's past, it shook my to the core. I locked it so tightly within my heart that even sharing about everything, she couldn't see it. What I learned about her shocked me, even more than finding out the Earth was flat.

AZRAEL

I have no idea what those two experienced in there, but I can certainly tell you my trip was relaxing. Except the turning into human part afterward. That hurt a bit. I called the others to stop before heading to our destination. We needed to rest and recover, since teleportation was potentially an emotionally overwhelming experience. The town had a huge library, and I had some necessary research to do. After having studied what I needed, we packed for our journey.

Exiting the town of Kushiyama, we headed east through the mounds of heavy snow. It must have fallen recently, because it was higher than I remember on our last visit. We entered the grounds of the so-called Castle of Fear. It was a large angular building with two nearby towers built diagonally at their base but their actual structure faced us. The rough stone structure was marked by a series of archways, and the front of the building had some strange pillars nearby capped with glass orbs. The orbs were constantly discharging electricity around the building from one pillar to another. This electricity was generating just enough heat that any nearby cold weather turned to rain, so there was green grass near the castle where the area outside the castle had snow. A woman waited nearby this castle. Something about her was different, but I couldn't figure out what it was. She had long blond hair parted neatly despite the weather, she wore a light blue dress, and she was clearly beautiful, it just seemed odd for her to be out in the middle of nowhere like this.

She touched Ambrosia's shoulder, “I am Tiamat, and I would like to talk with you, miss.” Ambrosia muttered, “She's got a very gentle and kind appearance. Looking at her, I'd never believe she could hurt anyone. I trust her totally.” I wasn't so sure, as I had seen enough demons in angel's faces. Still, my senses didn't pick up demonic aura. Aqorm agreed with me about the aura, but had other doubts, “Ummm, Ambrosia, aren't you rushing your judgment a bit?” Ambrosia shook her head, “Nonsense! How could anyone beautiful ever hurt anyone?” Aqorm laughed, “I gather you've never seen other women reject men, then?” Elias silenced them both,“Shhhh, you guys, pay attention to her.”

Tiamat continued, “As I was saying, there is a creature terrorizing the tower nearby. I hear you need a proof of courage, so if you defeat that, I'll be sure to give you mine.” Ambrosia mumbled something I couldn't catch.

AMBROSIA

I muttered, “Wait, I thought the Border Guard said he needed the head or heart of the creature, not something that can just be given like that. Ah well, who cares so long as the job is done.” I guess I had misunderstood. Heading past the beyond creepy pillars, we entered the tower. The first thing we noticed was that it was terribly dark, so we turned on our lantern. It was a good thing we kept this with us. The first room wasn't terribly scary, it was just a room with a divider. At least, it wasn't scary until... okay, I was gonna say until some creature popped out at us, but nothing really did. How disappointing.

The second room had Grims. As we entered, we noticed them rushing towards us, and fled the room. We entered again, cautiously, and noticed that they seemed to reset to their

original positions rather than crowd the door, or follow us to the next room. This was handy. After repeated visits, we took notes about the pentagon-shaped formation of the ghosts, and drafted strategies around it. Grims normally wandered aimlessly around wide areas such as graveyards, but when they were clearly summoned to guard an area like this, we could plan stuff around them. “We could study their movement pattern and weave around them,” I suggested. This was dismissed as too risky. Elias's plan to prep a trap using holy water and gunpowder and a system of gears seemed too convoluted, and it wasn't clear how the Grims would allow him to set all of this up before they rushed all of us. Zoe's plan involved send a Fire spell spiraling around the room to engulf everything. We put it on the back-burner, since it wasn't clear if the reason these creatures showed up in the exact spot was that they were actually summoned there. If she blasted everyone, then they respawned, things could be dangerous. Nevras said, “I'm pretty sure I could cut these ghosts into ribbons using my Vacuum Slice. How about I...” We all shook our heads at this one. It was the sort of plan for someone like Sera entering alone, but a team of people in the dark would get in the way of the attack. And it had the tendency of dismembering and decapitation, so no thanks. Azrael's plan was also complicated, but it seemed like it could be the solution to the problems of Zoe's plan. All of us would get inside Azrael's barrier. We'd start pushing the cube of force from inside, while Zoe flooded the room with fire. The fire would keep the Grims from slicing at the runes of the barrier, and the barrier would protect from the fire outside it.

ZOE

I'm not sure I ever used so much mystic power. As Azrael pushed, I stretched my Fire spell fine enough to cover the entire room, aware that the Grims were closing in on me. I was stressed out enough that my stomach was turning, but I gradually turned up the juice. The flames began to smoke around the rags of the Grims. Grims, if they haven't been described before, are a sort of floating spirit with long curved appendages, with wool rags covering their body, no feet or lower body to speak of, and a face shadowed everywhere but bright glowing eyes. I turned up the heat. The Grims were now pushed up against the wall, and their rags were starting to burst into flame. It was no good. The barrier was holding, and they were making it to the other side of the room, but the Grims were starting to push back against the intense heat. I turned up the heat even more, but with so many targets, so far apart, it was draining too much of my power...

AZRAEL

I glanced back at her. Noticing she was starting to look tired, I decided to help. Zoe had some serious magic, and if she survived this, she'd have even more, but for now, her lack of skill was putting her in serious danger. I set down a small stone, and imbued it with barrier generating ability, parking them in this position. Covering myself in another barrier, I moved beside Zoe. The fan of flames was still going and the creatures were now covered in a steady flame, but without some help, they'd eventually win, since she would likely run out soon. Gathering fire runes instead to an extremely tight sphere, I called out, “*Flaming Sphere*!” I tossed the ball at the farthest left, and then the farthest right with another. The Grims hit by this spell suddenly exploded into fire, ripping away the rags to reveal floating bones and shadows beneath, before they too were stripped away by the intense heat, turning the critters into light and ash. Zoe could now narrow her spell into a tighter stream, and so she did, finishing the rest.

We entered the next room carefully, with eyes open for creatures that might attack. Instead, much of the room was torn up, with gaping pits covering most of the area. It didn't look like the floor had collapsed, though. There had been no bits of stone rubble on the floor below, and the holes appeared to be planned, with even gaps and stone shelves holding up the remaining area. We would need the Jump Boots to navigate this area.

AMBROSIA

It was my turn to shine. Only I could do this, so I mustn't let the others down. Running pigeon-toed, I kicked hard against the ground. I ummm flopped on the ground because I was running pigeon-toed instead of properly. Let's try this again. Stepping more deliberately, I extended my left leg while my other leg bent at the knee, then switched

legs, getting off to a good run, then raising my left leg high in the air, bending the right leg backward, and pushing the rest of my body forward, carrying my legs forward again. I jumped as hard and as far as I could, clearing the pit and landing on the ledge. I wobbled a bit, but the Jump Boots worked. The others were safe by my side.

Of course, this was far from over. I jumped to the left, then forward, then right, and all around, carefully navigating the gaps in the flooring. One false step, and I'd fall to my doom. We were on a long platform that swept around one of the pit sections, so we carefully stepped sideways around the walkway, making our way carefully to the door. The section of walkway nearest my left foot started to crack. “Jump!” Nevras called out. I lunged forward clawing at the ledge as I jumped just short. Nevras was a tad more athletic, and jumped past me. “Give me your hand,” he requested. Moving my shoulder, I reached my arm up. I was taking a risk, as I reached with the one arm, my other arm had to hold the rest of my body. Suddenly, I understood why people don't offer their hands easily, since I now had to hold my own body up with one hand. I was slipping... Some of the others held his legs so he could reach over some more. Nevras wasn't especially strong but he managed though, yanking me up to the top. He grabbed my arm, then as I ascended, grabbed his other hand around my waist, carrying me past the threshold of the nearby doorway. Setting me down, he looked at me as I hugged him close. I was kinda relieved to be alive.

The next room looked peaceful enough. Unlike the others, it appeared well lit, only having some tiny dots on the floor. Aqorm rushed forward, only to stop suddenly. “Hold up,” she said, “something about this feels wrong.” I continued walking, saying as I went, “Nonsense, this looks fi-” Then it happened.

AQORM

Elves has sharp senses. In addition to my ability to smell and hear much more strongly than the average human, to see in the dark, and to read Fey, my natural abilities of geomancy mean that I am able to understand traits of the terrain around me.

Ambrosia likes to rush forward blindly without thinking meant she wound up stepping on a spike trap. Thankfully, the spike wasn't too long, and she wasn't impaled since it retracted, but it stabbed through her shoes to her feet, then as she fell over, it stabbed her knees too, then she caught herself but it stabbed her hand.

We helped her get out of the spikes, and to flat ground. Elias used a Regenerate spell on her to gradually let her whole body heal. She shivered a bit, as her wounds closed. “It hurts,” she said. I told Elias, “Why don't you stay with her? I imagine we're near the top. If you guys don’t catch up with us, we'll catch up to you when you come down.”

Nevras and the others headed up without those two, and for the first time since I joined, I was alone with him. I had always found him sorta hot, so I tried to come up with conversation. “Hey ummm...” I said, but ultimately realized I couldn't think of anything at all to talk about with him, “nevermind.” He said “Alright, then.” We walked along in relative silence, while I missed Elias's conversations. Skirting around spike traps, with me every now and then telling the group to turn at a certain spot, we managed to avoid being stabbed. Finally, we made it to the room's exit. It was funny how all of these floors had traps that were effectively contained. I wonder what the next one had... oh fuck, no.

ELIAS

In a rare moment, Nevras and I had effectively switched partners. I attempted to make conversation, but I noticed immediately that she did not share Aqorm's interest in my favorite topics. It might have been around the point where she rolled her eyes that it became obvious. “Can you walk now?” I asked. She nodded, “I'm pretty cool now. Your healing did the trick. Took awhile though. Why didn't you use something quicker?” I explained that typically to heal large areas, I'd have to use Recover... which was overkill since it typically healed multiple people at once. I continued to explain that Regenerate was typically the best way of healing minor wounds anyway because while healing closed up wounds quickly, it often left breaks and sprains unnoticed, while this used the body's own systems to address everything. She looked more confused than when I started. “Let's try to rejoin the others,” I finally said, “I'll lead.” Using my staff, I poked in the ground, testing for spikes popping out. I hadn't Aqorm's senses, so this was an

incredibly slow process. “Can't we do this any faster?” she pleaded. I thought carefully, “Hmmmm... sometimes designers hide a safety disarm in case they have to get through the area and can't remember what to do. Look around the room for... a lever or switch or anything that looks out of place.” After some time passed, she noticed that one of the beams in this floor's ceiling just seemed to hang there. “I think it's that one!” she said as she pointed it out. Pulling out her fishing rod she cast a few times unsuccessfully, until finally leaning just so, in order for the line to wrap several times around the dangling wood. Pulling down hard, the plank turned, and we heard a distant mechanical sound like the grinding of gears. The holes in the floor began to close up, so Ambrosia unhooked the fishing pole from the ceiling, and we continued on our path. We hadn't gone far into the next room before watching Nevras bloody, disarmed, and on his knees.

NEVRAS

Let's back up a little. I made it into the next room with Aqorm only to find my path blocked by Sera. His intense eyes glared at me. He said, “So, we meet again...” Aqorm was either clueless or just liked getting under his skin, because she asked him, “Wait, who are you again?” I put my palm to my face in despair. True, it had been months of journeys, collecting Crests, and generally not encountering the pair at all. Besides, he was separated from his counterpart. Wait, why exactly were the two split up? “My name is Sera!” He as much as shouted, “We met at the Hidden Forest and fought over those keys. Is any of that familiar?” She grinned, and suddenly I knew she was trolling. She said, “Nope, sorry. Never met you before.” Sera looked ready to kill her.

I found myself wondering how he had gotten here anyway. He would have had to get past the spike traps, pits, and the Grim. Ah, of course. Without Phim, he was a solo adventurer and could use moves that I had been afraid to because of their tendency to hurt people nearby. And the rest was probably his athleticism. Sera took what she was saying in stride for a few seconds, but eventually her continued teasing got to him. “Okay, that's it,” he said, “you're dying now!” Stepping between the two of them, I mediated, “Stop teasing him, Aqorm. He's pretty mad.” Then I thought of something, “Hey ummm, what happened to your friend the dwarf?”

He scoffed, “The guy went off on some damn fool quest, trying to find some huge Crystal. He said it controlled reality, but I know. He just wanted a gem that he could sell for loot, and not cut me in on the deal!” Aqorm blurted out, “Welp, you're the sucker then, aren't ya?” Those were fighting words. Sera drew his sword and charged us.

Zoe and Azrael didn't try to cast in sword fights. Yeah, I know it sounds like bringing a knife to a gun fight, but there's a small gap while you're drawing in runes, where the caster is wide open. They weren't straight casters like Elias so they helped, Azrael with her sword Raphael and its glowing flame aura and Zoe with scythe in hand. Aqorm, having only knives and probably wanting to stay out of combat anyway despite sorta kinda provoking this fight in the first place, spent most of the battle trying to dodge out of his way. You don't bring a knife to a sword fight, after all.

Sera was incredibly skilled. Despite not having Phim to help, he had obviously spent most of this time training, while we had done significantly more aimless wandering and avoiding creatures. Plus, he'd probably been training against a great number of creatures with just him fighting. As good as those two were, and believe me when I say Zoe and Azrael were experts at their weapons, they still weren't good enough. Zoe was seamlessly rotating her scythe hand over hand, attacking from above and below, swinging fiercely against him. At the same time, Azrael swung her sword at him from the other direction. She used Taijijian, an ancient sword style. She thrusted her sword in a rapid motion, but it was no good. Sera beat their attacks aside from both directions. It looked almost like we were moving in slow motion. He swung high, then back, low, and back again. The speed seemed impossible, until I noticed his sword. His sword had broad blade but an extra long handle suited for juggling, and this is more or less what he was doing. This cut the time it took to swing the sword by transferring his sword from one hand to another, so it was a good trick. He was obviously ambidextrous. “Hey, I got this,” I told them. As before, Sera was strictly an honorable fighter, and refused to battle noncombatants. Despite fighting two people at once a second ago, and despite someone else who shall

remain nameless provoking him into this battle, he left such parties largely alone. Although, he did give Aqorm a stern glare.

Sera had definitely improved. I tried fighting him with techniques, but he pulled out a shield that had been conspicuously unused against his whole battle against those two. Apparently in the time he had been gone, he had also been practicing shield techniques. As I used the Standing Jump Thrust against him, he called out, "*Nullifying Block.*" With almost casual form, he pressed his shield forward. The wide fanning strike was sucked into the shield, leaving no sign that there was any kind of impact. I tried Wave Thrust next, but watched him slam his shield hard against the ground, calling out "*Radius Barrier*" as he effectively stopped the seismic motion from getting anywhere near him. At his skill level, using a short-range technique like Speed Slash might be a bad idea.

I switched to basic sword attacks, confident that my sword was sharp enough to cut through his blade, a feat which would normally be impossible but for the unorthodox materials of my sword. And yet, he handled the blade like a katana master, expertly avoiding impact with the sharp edge of my blade while simultaneously fending off my attacks. Every blow I made wound up with him hitting the side of my blade with his edge, rather than the other way around. "Sloppy," he said, trying to veer his sword around my sword to slash my arm, causing me to step back, "maybe if you spent less time on fancy techniques, and more time rehearsing the fundamentals of sword-fighting, you could beat me. You have a very sharp blade, yes. But you forgot the basic principle all good swordsmen adhere to. 'Pounding a blade and sharpening it cannot be kept for long.'" He was right, of course. In owning this beyond razor sharp sword, I had a blade that was so sharp because parts of the blade were about an atom thick. But despite all reinforcements, this meant that it could be shattered easily by something that could cut those bonds. He used Vacuum Slice without even calling it out, something only possible for one who had mastered the technique, making one surgically exact slice through the blade. My broad slices used from the same technique earlier appeared clumsy in comparison. The blade fell to the ground with such force that the ceramic material shattered into bits. The durasteel inner part was also cut through. My sword was now a fractured, sliced up, and worthless nub of a blade. I tossed it aside.

Sera was well-disciplined fighter. If I had to say, he'd probably been in one of the armies, and was well-trained. I imagine if he was specifically hired to kill us, we'd all be dead. As it was, it was lucky he didn't know that the bounty he was actually after was that "girl" who I'd been awhile back. The last thing I wanted was to have this guy after me. He was going easy on us, because it wasn't part of a bounty, meeting every attack with only about the same amount of force as I gave. While I continued to fight with just my hands and feet after my sword broke, he quickly ended that by hamstringing me.

It was around this point that Ambrosia saw me. "Nevras, no!!! Don't hurt him." Seeing that I was unarmed, she lent me back the First Iron knife that I had given her earlier. Sera swung, yet I focused on blocking. I won't say it wasn't difficult, my knife didn't give a great ability to block due to the sheer difference in size of the weapon. On the ground, unable to really walk much, I slashed at the blade, forcing his blade back just enough that it stopped his momentum. Amazingly, his blade was not even chipped by this impact. Seeing I had some other rare weapon, he apparently decided I hadn't learned my lesson. He attempted to use the Vacuum Slice on this as well, but when it hit, the sword just started rejoining itself. He glanced at it, "First Material? Where on Earth did you find that weapon?" He brushed past me admitting what had turned out to be a very narrow defeat. I felt no joy in such a victory, for I knew how close it had been.

After all of us were healed, we made our way up to the top of the Castle of Fear. Outside, it was cold and rainy. A creepy-looking beast awaited us. This was obviously our mark, right? The beast was roughly shaped like a dragon, but almost an undead caricature. It was filled with rot and its eye sockets had eyes but they had a creepy look to them. Defending myself, I cut at it with the knife. Strange, I felt no resistance at all. Normally, despite the First Material being fairly sharp, it cut well past the point of a normal material since it was not actually sharp in the conventional sense. But this... this was like I'd just cut through mist. There was something deeply wrong here... "Wow," said Ambrosia, "that knife really is sharp."

CHAPTER 21

In which Ambrosia discovers beauty is only skin deep, it's what's inside that counts.

AMBROSIA

I begged the knife back from Nevras. After all, he was probably done battling. We made our way back down from the Castle of Fear by rappelling, using some spare ropes that Elias had taken from the ship. There was just no way any of us were going back inside that place.

Nevras suggested we talk to that woman again, so I did. She was so pretty. Her blond hair, that unlike mine didn't seem to ever get tangled or filled with dirt or gunk, glowed with an aura that hung like a mist around her body and her outfit. Even her name, Tiamat, sounded so exotic and friendly and not at all like a giant mutant three-headed undead dragon chicken. I wonder why I thought of that specific image. Anyway, she was someone to be trusted.

I decided to be diplomatic and cautious. I wouldn't want to offend her, after all. “I defeated it, but then something happened,” I said, continuing, “You know, if I didn't know better, I'd say there was something weird about this whole "deal" of yours. The Border Guard told me the creature would need to have its heart or head (can't remember which) taken out to show as proof, but you said that all I'd need is to give me the proof... Will you give me the proof?” She smiled sweetly, “Of course. Why would someone as cute and innocent as I am lie?” Aqorm apparently smelled something, because suddenly she told me, “Don't listen to her lies, Ambrosia. I don't trust her.” How intolerant. Why couldn't she see that this was the right thing to do? Tiamat almost echoed my thoughts, “How could someone like me be a threat? I'm just so innocent and pure! Besides, who are you gonna trust, people you've known for weeks, or me, who you just met?” The answer was obvious. I told her that I trusted her more, who I'd just met. She smiled, and the bright aura around her seemed to grow. In fact, it continued to grow, blinding the rest of us. “Ambrosia, you're hopeless!” A large figure moved in the shadows and suddenly everyone was screaming.

GOD

Reset.

AMBROSIA

As I was saying, of course I trust my friends more. Who would trust a complete stranger? “You seriously think I'd choose you?” I scoffed, “I don't buy that sweet and innocent act!” Nevras sat this one out since he had no weapon, but the rest of us attacked her. Zoe blasted her with Fire spells, and whacked her with her scythe. Azrael swung Raphael, which blazed at full power. She dodged out of the way, but I whipped my fishing pole around her, tying her in place. Now that she couldn't move, the two attacked her as before. She shrieked, “Owwwww~~~ Quit being so mean~! You're hurting me!” All the same, aside from some clothing damage, I looked at her body and it seemed to virtually unscratched. Aqorm tossed her daggers at her, which being made from elven, caused a reaction in most of the sketchier creatures. The area she stabbed started to blacken and she screamed for real. “It hurts...” she said. Her skin started to wriggle and stretch like a body inside it was using it like a cocoon. A small tear appeared in her back, as her real body began to rip its way free. “A gigai,” Aqorm commented, “I've heard of these. Skinwalkers sometimes wear skins to impersonate people. Then some creatures picked up on it and started weaving flesh from dead bodies.” Elias said, “I'm not sure what to expect here,” so he promptly cast Regenerate and Protection on all of us. The false skin ripped off completely and honestly I was right about the three-headed dragon chicken thing. Only, it was more horrifying than I imagined. Her(?) mouths were beak-like and her toes were spaced apart like a bird, but otherwise, she looked more like a large black dragon with tough-looking skin. Her eyes glowed red, and that brightly colored aura was gone, replaced with a miasma I hadn't even seen from Thanatos. This one probably ate visitors for fun, and I imagine half of them were from those who didn't

survive the castle. As she spoke, I realized my mistake. “You thought I was a harmless little girl? Well, have a taste of my true power!” he said. This had been a male dragon beast wearing the a female gigai. But how did he get inside something so much smaller?

The dragon beast was naturally very strong, and right now Nevras was not much good right now, so he couldn't use his Dragon Roar. Zoe quickly learned that her weapon was barely effective, and the critter's skin appeared to be fireproof and mostly immune to magic as well. To make stuff worse, he had powerful jaws and venom dripping from his fangs. Only Aqorm's daggers seemed to have much effect, and she tossed them at this one earlier. Azrael used her symbols to protect us and slow him down, but his skin was tough enough even to shrug off most damage from Raphael. Tiamat had a few cuts and bruises, but no more than that. Maybe it was time to use that... but no, not Thanatos's Crest! I didn't want to kill anymore. Not like that. But I needed to be able to fight him!

I thought back. Because of my prophetic abilities, I was able to see ahead slightly, so I learned my powers before they were explained to me, having memories of training I hadn't done in real time. So I learned my powers when I got the Crest, then later I was able to see the time training. This meant most of my skills were learned instantly.

In each case, the residing Oracle taught me more than just their main attack. For example, along with the holy attack, Alexander could do that water parting thing. Four Gods can summon beasts and do elemental attacks, but also gave me some ability to adjust the environment around me. And Thanatos gave me immunity to death spells, the ability to cause death, and...

I saw him standing before me, teaching me. He said, “Remember, if it ever gets to be too much...” At the time, I had no idea what he meant. If what becomes too much? But now, I knew he meant the strain of watching things die. I remembered the move, Needle At Bottom Of Sea. The three-headed dragon stood before me. My Crest glowed and I made my move.

My death technique could be described as pulling. I suck out the life essence of the target of my attack and suck it away, which is what is so disturbing about all of this. They seemed for full of life and suddenly they dropped dead. This felt almost like the opposite. I was pushing something on to this dragon, filling it with something. Of course, this thing I was adding wasn't making it more energetic or alive, but hey, at least it wasn't killing it. What was I adding? Weariness. The feeling one gets when life has been too long. The dragon became sluggish. His skin, while tough, wasn't as quick as before, so the stabs were starting to make a dent. It wasn't moving as fast, and it wasn't attacking as effectively. While before, Elias had to spend his energy healing and protecting us when the creature ferociously bit at our arms and legs while its toxin sickened us and burned our skin, Tiamat was starting to miss a lot now. Elias started casting Bless to boost the penetrating power of our attacks. Before, he managed to tighten his muscles to protect against our attacks. But now, Tiamat's movements were rigid, his joints were stiff, and it was fighting like something that hadn't been sleeping in days. I dunno if dragons need to sleep, but you get the point.

Zoe drove her scythe hard into the critter. But this time, it didn't react right, and that tough skin and scale wasn't enough. It drove deep into the jugular of that head and blood spurted out. Zoe hadn't cut the spine, just severed the skin and muscle and tendon of it so the head was still awake and trying to struggle. Trying to cry out. Trying to breathe. It made a gulping motion while it slowly died, fully conscious and aware. I was reminded of a PETA video on slaughter methods. Nothing should have to die this way. The other two heads, were justifiably angry, and lunged after her, but they were slow and in each other's way. Azrael killed the opposite side head with a single blow of the sword, slicing straight through the neck bone. The sight was brutal to watch, but the head died mercifully and instantly. The middle head was dealt with by Aqorm and Nevras. Aqorm had managed to salvage her weapons in the midst of the distraction. Tiamat, weak from the blood loss of his other heads, was dizzy and distracted. Nevras used this to leap onto its back, shifting to one side or another when Tiamat moved to bite it. And then he did something crazy. Lunging forward, he called out, “*Falcon Punch*!” He put his leg forward to get a good angle, twisted his waist as much as possible riding on a dragon, and using his hips to generate extra force, drove his fist hard into the middle of its chin. It

wobbled and then passed out. Aqorm cut off this head with her daggers while it was out. The animal was dead. We just had to figure out how to carry its heads back.

ELIAS

When in doubt, head to the library. After long hours in the library, I managed to narrow it down to about three options. I could learn necromancy, and create a patchwork reconstruction to move itself to the teleportation pad. Unfortunately, that wasn't happening. Besides the whole necromancy taboo, which was bad enough, there was the matter of controlling three heads, all of which were hostile to us. Nahhhhh... I had also heard of an ancient device but it involved metallurgy. The last idea, the one I tried involved shrinking heads. Yes, seriously.

I shall tell you how I did it, on the off-chance any of you barbarians from the so-called "modern era" want to know how heads are shrunken. I boiled the heads until the skin tightened and dried the heads so the excess moisture was removed. Moving them back to town would draw some stares, so we packed them into cloth sacks and moved into town during the slow periods between guard shifts, spacing our entrances out enough so as to not draw too much attention. It wound up being like the riddle of the fox, the goose, and the bean. Nevras, Zoe and Azrael (lately, it seemed like they were doing more and more as a team even when not strictly necessary), and I were carrying one. As I say, we arrived separately, so we had to hide these giant heads behind the church grounds while each of us waited for the others. Nevras and Ambrosia entered first. For some reason, despite Ambrosia being almost phobic about this mode of transport before, she held Nevras's hand as they entered together this time. The two were instructed to send a short note when they had left the pad, so as to avoid the chance of mixing living and dead material on the teleporter. After being sent a note saying, « We're doing good here » I tossed the first head onto the pod. « Got it » I heard back. Zoe and Azrael dropped theirs off, only to get back a message, « I need help dealing with this stuff! » So then, those two came, and then Aqorm came. I was stuck holding a giant head, alone in a big city. Aqorm used to like me, right? So why was she leaving me alone like this? I dropped the last dragon head, before getting the all clear to come myself.

The Divine Border was just the same as before, but this time we had proof of our worth. Surely now he would grant us access! We entered the building hauling a bunch of shrunken heads, and tossed them on his table. "Ahem, I'm afraid I have bad news. You see, these heads are in pretty poor condition. I will give you the Divine Passport, but I'm afraid I can't stamp it." Ambrosia whined, "But... all that hard work..."

We stood at a mountain pass where the barrier was. Strange, I remember two guards here. No matter. It wasn't like we could enter past the barrier anyway. A voice echoed inside our heads. *The living may not enter these gates without dying or receiving my Seal and bearing the Divine Passport.* Ambrosia kept pushing against the barrier. But it was no good, without a stamped passport, how could we proceed? Ambrosia, lacking other options, decided to pray to God. She wasn't part of any organized religion, and I could tell from her words that she hadn't really done this much. Ambrosia's faith was about seeing God through the humans she interacted with. Ambrosia spoke, "God, you know I suck at praying. I don't feel worthy enough to enter your gates. But I believe you are the same God that helped so many people, and I would like to think you'd have some pity or Grace or something for me. I kinda need to enter these gates, and…. Sigh... God, I know I'm not any kind of great person or anything, which is probably why the guard didn't stamp the passport, but... I'd really appreciate it if you'd let me in so I could continue the mission you gave me..."

He responded, *The Divine Passport never needed to be stamped. All that is needed is for the one entering to desire my Grace. Those who force their way in shall be denied, while those who wish to be part of my kingdom shall be accepted, even those who are guests. The guard was just trolling you.* I sighed. Something told me this place would only get weirder.

CHAPTER 22

In which Ambrosia beholds Heaven.

ZOE

I remembered many lifetimes. The inside of the mountain pass was like the mountains of Texas and New Mexico, near the area of Tucumcari. The mountain gradually sloped before ending in a plateau. There was a cave off to the side, but I decided to worry about that later. It smelled of old metal, and I had a bad feeling about it. The trail wound around the mountain, and I was forced to search for a path to Heaven, yet I had no idea how to climb on to a cloudy surface. At the peak, I found a stone bridge sloped in such a way that I would soon find out.

The "soil" of Heaven was like walking on bread or maybe gelatin. It squished and I felt sure we were going to sink into it and drown, but then as soon as we stepped away from it, it would wobble back into place. Elias said that it was named Water III, and went on to talk in great depth about how glad he was that it was not Water II or even regular water vapor. The stuff seemed to behave almost like snow, but it was not at all cold. I could shape it like soil, I could scoop some up and pack it together, I could push at it and brush it aside. And yet, it also had the same effects as water. The water that touched skin or went inside a container became liquid, and I could drink that or wash my face with it, and looking around at the trees and other plants here, I obviously could also use it to grow things. But when exposed to open air or in contact with more of this stuff, it turned back into the cloudy white fluff that I stood on. As we were still near the sky bridge, I decided to quickly run forward, so as to not step the wrong way and fall to my doom. All the same, as I ran, the stuff reacted in a way that I don't expect the soil to do, bouncing as I run, and I flopped over and fell on my face.

Walking carefully, we made it slowly through Heaven. The place was mostly one big island, with streams and rivers of regular water, rocky areas (it looked like the mountains were stolen from somewhere else), forests and farms, and houses. However, in order to get to the big island, we had to make our way through a number of free floating islands. These were connected by a series of bridges, and on a clear day, you could see right through the clouds to the lands below. A waterfall that was so nutrient-rich that it produced vines wherever it fell, flowed in a steady stream from the main island to the lower islands. Anyone afraid of heights would be terrified, while those who liked the idea of flying would get the view of a lifetime. We made it through the first few sections without seeing much of anything. Then we saw a remnant, a type of ghost that was basically like a large blue flame. After this, I saw a fire elemental. Despite the remnant and the fire elemental both being fire creatures, the elemental was more like a woman made from fire, whereas the remnant was simply a mass of fire. We managed to offend the elemental by asking her about whether water puddles hurt her, but she looked more embarrassed than angry.

The first region was a human encampment. They had built houses, and were currently engaged in farming, from the looks of it. Over to the west was another island, unconnected to the rest. Unlike the others, it was solid rock, and I had no idea how something so heavy managed this. But hey, I was standing on water turned to a bouncy gel so nothing surprised me. Near the houses was an inn, made from stone with blue shingles and a set of steel doors. We were tired and hungry. I was sure that this being Heaven, they would give us free food and lodging.

It turned out that lodging was in fact free, since it consisted of the resident angel using Script to procure bedding out of thin air. Food, on the other hand, was rather pricey, since they apparently can't make it themselves.

MICHAEL

I am one of God's archangels. No, I'm not a Seraphim. That title is reserved for those that have no human blood in them. The original Nephilim, that is, were neither angel nor demon, but something in between. Today, there are few of those, as a result of all the messing around with humans. Basically, all of us with the blood of Man, when they are created, is divided into a male angel here and a female demon in Hell. That's right, I said

created. Unlike humans, we typically are not born, we inherit a Design from two previous angels, since in order to give birth we must alter our bodies but Leviticus 18:22 makes this uncomfortable area. Also, unlike humans, we are not born inside the body, but emerge fully grown from a condensed mass of energy. You see, only Seraphim have males and females among them, because only Seraphim are born. While only Seraphim are born, only archangels like me have names. Most Seraphim are also archangels, but the reverse is not always true.

A name is a part of the soul (just as the spirit is part of a body) that gives us permanency. It gives us a distinct identity, as contrasted with those angels which are called into being when God needs a specific message sent. Those angels are taken from a Design of two archangels, mixed into a specific teaching. The angels and their opposition, demons, usually have a lifespan of maybe two weeks or so. The Seraphim and we archangels, on the other hand, typically live forever, yet seldom or never have offspring. This is why the island of Heaven is not overrun with such beings, since few of them exist except long enough to deliver a message. As to the Seraphim, well they do give birth, but mainly among themselves. God destroyed quite a few for mixing their blood with humans, so all that is left is a few extremely pure cases of Seraphim, and many of them are so frightening to look at that they have to tell humans, “Do not be afraid.”

As an archangel, I have a long history. There are less than a thousand archangels, and humans know very few by name. Michael is my name, I am the angel who drove Satan down to Hell, and slaughtered most of the demons he made through corrupt breeding. Ever since then, angels and demons have always been strictly balanced in population, with the exception of Seraphim (which are neither). I am the archangel of those who fight, from police to military, but I also support good health, so I am patron of grocers and medics. Basically, I'm the commander.

While there were plenty of archangels in God's tent, it was by no means all of them. Other archangels are scattered around existence, some watching over important humans, others milling about the island of Heaven, and still others assigned as helpers to the Reapers or to a specific duty God has in mind. Reapers are the backstage mechanics for existence, while angels and archangels are the hired crew.

Demons, like angels, are created as part of a message. It is their job to stop angels from delivering these messages. God likes the idea of balance, so yeah, he allows his own messages to be sabotaged as a matter of chance. Angels, Fallen, and the original Seraphim all have the Script allowing them to defend themselves; however, demons and Fallen are not without defense themselves, as they can use the destructive power of Hellfire (Seraphim can use something similar but it is a golden color and they call it Balefire). The best way of putting this is that Script is a sort of code. For example, if I were outside and it started to rain (yes, it does rain and even snow in Heaven, our clouds are below the rain clouds), I could say the following, “***Protective Dome - Target: Self***” which would designate that I wanted a protective dome, just big enough for myself. Script is capable of summoning solid objects, including weapons of war or common chairs and tables. God could use Script too, like the the Reset ability, but some of the Script that God used was impossible for us. God uses something called the Console to use Script as it's not really part of God's main powers. It looked like a strange rectangular object that had a touchscreen**.** There's all sorts of keywords that we can use, but the point is, we angels can summon only energy and inanimate objects. We cannot directly create life through the use of Script. We can create eggs, seeds, and the like, though. But it is at least as hard for us to make food as you humans. With my spiritual powers, I could sense them from afar as they rested at the inn that night. Tomorrow they would probably make their way to the tent of God. If they could overcome the last trial.

AMBROSIA

Heaven was kinda cool. I know, I know, most people think the idea of Heaven is boring, but it's not like that at all.

For one, the weather isn't as nice as its reputation. Sure, more often than not while we were visiting we got 30°℃ weather. Oh right, Double Celsius starts at 0, not 32. So that's

about 60º Fahrenheit But, we did get the occasional rain or snow, and even violent storm. And because we were closer to the clouds, it seemed all the more violent. Whenever bad weather hit though, we got the experience of watching weather hit us, then pass through the “ground” to the land below. It was kinda interesting to watch. Before you wonder about how I could even set foot on Heaven before dying**,** the biggest misconception about Heaven and Hell was that they were part of the Afterlife. Sure, you could go to either after you died. But you could go to *any* place. Heaven and Hell were on the New Earth, and you could visit them as easily as one visited... Michigan. Heaven wasn't like a permanent destination, though. Living beings are easily bored creatures, after all. Even the best Afterlife becomes unbearably dull eventually, so after living in Heaven for a while, one could choose to take on a new life.

For another, it's kinda the opposite of many people's definition of utopia. “Peace and harmony,” “share and share alike,” “open borders,” and “no hunger or thirst,” these are people's conceptions of Heaven. It's not really like that. There's no real requirement to share here, there simply is a enough for everyone. And housing is rather difficult, since resources are needed and there are few trees, although you can possibly talk an angel into making you a house. If you manage to piss them off though, you're on your own. But let me clarify that, since I kinda seemed to contradict myself just now. Heaven has more than enough of *certain* things but a scarcity of others. Trees are not common because they tend to sink in cloudy soil, most seafood needs to bought down below, and the only pigs we have are those flying kinds. Building houses is tricky here.

Honestly, when it gets down to it, Heaven is kinda capitalist. It just has a weird type of money that seems to be based more on karma than anything else. I helped this lady find something the other day, and I swear my Record of Value had one more page than yesterday. Not that that's reliable. Most times I've only seen pages added were legitimately agreed upon work or trade, and random acts of kindness. I'm not really sure it can be earned by just doing good deeds though, it just happened for some reason.

And before you ask, no Heaven isn't some peaceful place. After all, there was a war in Heaven long ago. Demons probably aren't allowed back in. You were capable of fighting each other, but only if you agree to a duel. Otherwise, a barrier forms around each person and the attack bounces off. And no, you cannot be banned from Heaven, it wasn't like joining a forum and later getting banned because people didn't care for your rude jokes. It was more like the worst fate you could get was to be ignored by one or two people. But unlike living on Earth, there were always some people who would love even those who felt unlovable. As to crimes, God himself would act as both attorney (through Jesus) and judge. But it felt like the punishment was usually too soft, especially for the heinous crime of rude comments. But you could also convince yourself that you couldn't enter in the first place. This was the bottom line as to why demons weren't allowed in.

Although this place was a physical place, everything here felt strangely like a dream. If I felt bad here, flowers near me seemed to die, and an angel would come to try to cheer me up. It was not that you could ever lower the state of Heaven to the point of Earth or even Hell, though. Heaven and Hell were considered trendy tourist destinations, but their nature could change only so much. In fact, as an experiment, I tried to make myself gloomy. In Earth, one could do just that, but I only managed to make myself so depressed before there was a snap-back. I still felt like I felt, but the reality around me started to become so psychedelically positive that I started to giggle. I imagine Hell, which was also on the list to visit, might have the reverse effect.

As for the other stuff, no, Heaven definitely doesn't have open borders. The border, as you saw, only allows people in who understand the concept of Grace. Heaven, it turns out, is like a small town, yet at the same time infinite. It's kinda like the Unites States of old, there are different regions, filled with people of different types. The difference, of course, is that people can't flee from NY or CA to go bother Texans. Rather, the land is an unlimited number of parallel Heavens filled with the people you want to see. People in Texas Heaven could eat steak, carry guns around, and worship God all they want, while those liberals could do those *other* things they're so famous for with each other. Each version of Heaven was basically ruled by their vision and that of their friends. It is a clever way of defending the borders, as it tends to be the people who hate themselves the

worst that make trouble in their own country and have to become refugees elsewhere. As we entered, I am told about an acre of land was made to accommodate just us, and this land would disappear once we left.

Heaven has free trade, but given that the Record of Value isn't really currency outside of Heaven. By the way, Heaven used to have a different system of currency, it was called the Angel Coins. As you know, Angel Coins, or "guardian angel coins," are two headed coins that were carried by World War I and II pilots, and were believed as symbolic of miracles, blessings, and good tidings. The original Angel Coins came from God, but Augustine Dupre during King Louis XVI's reign took to copying the original mint. Each Angel Coin was intended as an angel's daily bread, to buy whatever the angel had need of that day, and then to be turned in. But since humans had no way of accounting for multiple stores that angels visited in a day, record books were invented, and the Angel Coin was spent on all the shops written on a page for the day. Gradually, tradition gave way to practicality, and a Record of Value was used instead. The point is, in Heaven you don't have to worry about money, since you have basically a checkbook for each day.

And as for hunger and thirst, well, they don't have this in the conventional sense. You could technically go without eating or drinking here, but you might start to feel abnormal. Part of what makes people feel normal is sharing meals with company. Nothing really dies here. Not plants, not animals, and no rotting takes place. But the best thing? Later on, I stayed here for like a month, and I never had my period. No misfortune of any kind happens unless you allow it, and no separation exists. You could visit or talk to anyone who ever lived in here, and nobody would die in from of your eyes.

I managed to meet most of the angels walking outside. On of these was an ex-princess of a tribe of angels, who told us, "I am a princess of the Archons," another name for archangels, those angels that have distinct identity, "but I recently have decided to journey among the people of Heaven, studying their ways." Aqorm correctly pointed out that she was probably male, since "she" wasn't a Seraphim. Another one ran a grocery store, selling mostly healthy food. After being around Heaven for awhile, I began to be able to figure out the difference between angels and archangels. The angels just sorta had a wispy look to them, their skin wasn't fleshed out, and they were nearly always heading out to deliver a message of some sort. Archangels on the other hand, appeared to stay close to the town with small exceptions to explore or pick up goods. The grocer headed down to the surface every third day or so, to get meat, dairy, and fish. Grains and vegetables were easy to grow here but livestock were heavy enough to sink through, so they were tough to come by. There was also a smith as a regular, but this one had a lot of orders right now, so we instead decided to keep exploring. That was when we came upon one of the more... ummm, classical Seraphim.

This one looked like a large creature with the head of a lion, dog, and a zebra merged to a single body. Somehow or other, the body matched the heads, but it had some serious wings. I wanted to run, but somehow I couldn't move. The creature, sensing my frustration, told me, "Do not be afraid." I had no idea what he/she/they/etc was talking about, I wasn't the least bit scared. Obviously. My panties being wet was because of the humidity. More out of curiosity than anything, I asked the creature, "What exactly... are you?" The creature responded, "Once, all angels were like me. Terrifying, and yet beautiful." The lion head kept trying to eat the zebra, but the dog was in between, and snarled at it, until it backed off. "There were those with the face of a bird, a lion, and a man. The were those of such beauty that six wings were needed to keep those it visited from bursting into flames. And there were the wheels within wheels, the thrones of eyes." I listened patiently, nodding, until my curiosity got the better of me, and I asked, "So...? What happened?" He(?) continued, "Humans are sex-crazed. They were somehow appealed by the strangeness of us, and bred like rabbits. Our race are called Nephiliim, and I am a Seraphim." I nodded. I totally understood, just looking at this three headed beastie made me want to hump it. No, I'm not being sarcastic, there is no way to adequately describe just how sexy a Seraphim looks since the attractiveness defies logic. But this one was hot. The sexy beast continued, "God punished most of those. Now, there aren't many left like me around." I laughed, mostly at the irony.

Moving onward, we decided to visit the smith. Although he still in fact had back orders, I insisted rather kindly that he put those on hold, and instead work on the project of getting Nevras a new sword.

NEVRAS

Let's be clear here. There was nothing kind about how Ambrosia insisted. She threatened bodily harm of all sort and manner, if the smith would not drop everything and make a sword. I looked at some of this angel's swords. They were objects of incredible beauty. The guy appeared to charge for his amount of time spent on a project, so some of this stuff would be beyond our ability to wait, despite our ability to pay in value. I thought about what Sera had said when he broke my sword, about swords being too sharp for their own good. After a great deal of thought, given all sorts of swords that he could have made, I told him, “I want something just sharp enough to cut, and just firm enough not to get broken easily. Something sturdy and reliable.” He nodded, “I know exactly what you mean. This will just take a second.” He took about getting each of his projects to a good stopping place, then looked at me. He instructed me, “The best swords have a part of the person using them. Tell me, why do you fight?” Hmmmm... After some more thought, I told him, “I fight for love and I fight for justice too. I fight to protect those I care about from harm.” The angel nodded, flexing his wings, “Yes, yes. I believe I can work with this. I will make you a sword out of love and light.” What he said sounded completely impossible, until I saw him grab sunlight out of the air, mold it into a ball and put it on the anvil. It was a nice yellow color. Then he came towards me, and drove a hand through my chest. I was freaked out, and fully expected to bleed to death, but instead of pulling out my internal organs, he returned with a tiny bit of pink light. He molded them together, much like a baker kneading bread of different flours, and then proceeded to pound and shape with his hammer. The light began to form into distinct sections, with the hilt and sheathe a pinkish color, while the tang and the blade were the color of fine butter. It was a full tang sword, so it was probably very sturdy. But right now, it was difficult to make out as it was mostly just light. He pounded away for a few hours, shaping light into a mostly flat shape, and then used a dizzying variety of hammers, hardies, and peens to mold the sword into a desired shape. By the end of this, it began to look similar to a claymore. It was a hand-and-a-half sword rather than a full-sized claymore though, with fairly clean edges, and a good firm blade. Unfortunately, there currently was very little to it. It was still just light shaped into a good form. He turned to me, “The sword needs to be tempered. Tell me about yourself. All of the hardships that you have endured.” As I spoke, the words began to take shape, like mighty fire in his forge. The sword began to heat up and glow. He kept me talking for a good while, airing grievances from long ago, until finally he grabbed the sword with tongs. He said, “That's enough. Now we need to quench the sword. I need your tears.” There was no way he was gonna get me to cry. No sir, not a chance, never... he told a long and incredibly sappy story about a lost puppy. Before long, he had a full jar of my tears, which he dumped into a tank filled with what appeared to be some sort of blood. He dropped the sword all the way in and watched the blood and the brine treat it. At long last, he held a more substantial looking sword. I asked him, “What was that you dumped my tears into?” He shrugged, “Oh that? That's the blood of the Lamb. Not only is it useful for cleansing sins, but for swords, there is nothing better to quench. Your sword is done. You will never need to sharpen it. Just remember what you fight for and it will be sharp enough. Try it out. Let's have a duel right now.” I agreed.

I touched the sword only to have it turn into light in my hands, and disappear into my chest. “What gives?!?” I demanded. All the hard work, and nothing to show for it! “Relax,” he said, “the sword responds to need. Watch.” He pulled a sword from seemingly thin air. It was a beautiful sword of some fine blue material that looked as clear as glass, inlaid with all sorts of etchings. It was clearly not steel but had all the quality of good Damascus steel. He swung it at me. “I don't have anything to defend myself with!” I cried out. He responded, while swinging it towards my frantically dodging body, “Place you hand on your heart. Imagine your heart as a sheath, and pull your hand away from it in a long motion as though drawing a sword. Remember, this

sword cannot be used against you. And you cannot be disarmed. This is the Phoenix Sword." I did so, skeptically, and sure enough, I wound up with a ball of light in my hands which quickly shaped itself into my sword. The blade looked almost golden, the hilt was a soft pink color, and the sword was more reminiscent of something that a magic girl would wield, complete with hearts and ribbons on the pommel. I felt embarrassed, but it passed. While it wasn't even half as fine as my opponent had, it was enough.

The difference in the quality of our weapons was rather obvious. While I was a more talented swordsman, it was like I was holding a toothpick against a hammer. His sword just looked so dense, while mine felt awkward in its size yet also too flimsy. His sword's design seemed to be more aerodynamic too, or maybe he was just more experienced using it, as he seemed able to swing about twice as fast. I dodged frantically, and swung my sword hard and parried as best as I could. The blade made a dull ringing sound as if in agony. We trained hard against each other, but the sword wasn't holding up well.

Swords do not usually break. This is something you see in movies all the time, but generally, unless a sword is really rusty or in poor quality, the nature of a well-made sword is that it doesn't break. Katanas are different, they are often folded to the point of being brittle, so it had to be wielded more like a fishing pole than a typical western sword. The only real time swords break, is when the swords are really too different from each other, like one is much softer or more brittle than the other. Otherwise, they have to swing them in such a way that the attacking sword has its edge ruined. I tried my best against this guy, but the blade felt completely alien to me. It was almost like I had a sword made from a wooden oar. I fought with skill, but as a smith, he was very strong, and he caught my sword off guard, striking not the edge, which is made to take impact, but the spine of the blade. It shattered like glass. Oh no, would I need to get yet another sword? "It's okay. Try drawing the sword again." Even more skeptical than the first time, I did so. To my enormous surprise, the sword was intact. Huh? "This sword is your fighting spirit," he said. "You are inexperienced with using it, so it broke against one who has mastered their weapon. Your sword **will** become stronger, but it is only as strong or weak as your heart." I tried again, and somehow, while the swords weren't evenly matched, it felt less one-sided. I thanked him and left.

We explored the island. Along with the moist feel of the ground becoming increasingly disturbing, we encountered plants that I had never seen anywhere else. I saw an actual lotus tree. Oh yes, there are lotus flowers, but this is an entirely different plant. This plant was the same one famed in the legend of the Lotus Eaters. Aside from that was the Tree of Life, a maple-like plant with bright pinkish-blue leaves which grows twelve types of fruit, one per month, and heals all kinds of wounds, provides a full meal, and confers everlasting life. Of course, the problem is, we're humans (except Aqorm). Now Aqorm could eat it, and become a pure-blooded elf, but the rest of us couldn't even touch the thing until we died. We humans had eaten from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, which meant we had to deal with the consequences of whatever sin is. And having that plus everlasting life, meant life tended toward unlimited shittiness. No thanks.

Birds flew past. The Benu bird was a type of heron that flew between this world and the Void, and its scream could be said to break the Void apart. Garudas, giant birds with human-like bodies and holy and wind powers shared the sky with angels. Orphan birds laid their eggs in the water, watching to see if they were a good egg that would hatch and join their mother, or a bad egg destined to live below. A roc parked itself on one part of the island, allowing humans that couldn't fly to use it to transport through the sky. A Yuanchu phoenix, like the one we saw before feasted on the bamboo here.

The phoenix had plenty to eat. There were patches of out-of-control bamboo, bee balm, some mint with a wild reddish tone, mushrooms of all colors, and kudzu in between sections of island, as though someone had designed a rainforest without any regard to what grew together, because here it didn't seem to matter. Rather than one plant choking out another, the bee balm and mint formed vines so it could grow even in areas where there didn't seem to be much space from trees, and the kudzu grew on the ground more like grass. Red tumbleweeds dotted an area to the north of this, with the palo verde and its green trunk nearby to make a sort of Christmas theme. Somehow these plants had

adapted to the moist soil despite being desert plants. I assumed it must be that the soil being made from water, could be selectively permeable. These weren't the only plants either, the Tree of Life somehow set aside a circle around itself where nothing grew, but the rest of this section of island had two other plants you've probably not heard of. I only knew of them from my mandatory education as future ruler of Phoenix. The crystal leaf looked normal enough, it was a light blue plant with stems and leaves as thick as blown glass, the plant was like a strange mix of the trunk and stem of a jade plant, with leaves more like a basil but for the extra thickness. The clear glassy plant was blue... until the sun came out from the clouds and then it became significantly more translucent with an astonishing iridescent nature. It was like someone puked rainbows on this cute little plant. I wanted this guy, so I tried to get a clipping. While the plant was soft enough to pet, I quickly discovered why it was called a crystal plant besides its extreme translucency and light-dispersing qualities, it was difficult to cut. I decided to leave it alone, as I'd heard that uprooting one sometimes killed it instantly. The last plant was dark onion. It was jet black and in a perpetual state of wilt, yet did not die. These did grow other places than Heaven, but typically only in strange places where nothing would grow. I was actually surprised to see one in Heaven.

On many of these trees, insects ate the fruit or gobbled up the leaves. Yet everything regrew fairly quickly. Many of these seemed to be metamorphic insects like butterflies and moths and dragonflies, although the coloration was much sharper than the rest of the New Earth. Wild colors of green, orange, and pink coated their bodies, and I even saw some gray insects. Lobster bugs floated about, their massive bodies blatantly defying the square-cube theory as they drifted along effortlessly, these horrid mix of crustaceans and insects freaking out most people who had seen then the first time, and it didn't help they also had faces like gators and weird-looking front feet. Dream fish swum by. *Komainu* (lion-dogs) used their tails to sweep away yin flies, the only true enemy of the growing plants here. The yang flies were involved in aiding the fast growth of plants and had soft earth tones to their horsefly-like body. But every few years, yang flies would turn into yin flies and their coloration turned dark. *Qilin* wandered about the island as local wildlife, occasionally eating the bamboo.

Aside from living things, the dead lived here. Dead humans here looked alive enough that it was basically impossible to tell without noticing they glowed, for the dead now had etheric bodies rather than physical ones. They were not intangible like mere ghosts though, but at least as solid as beings of flesh. These were those who were “saved” whose souls evolved from simple shapeless orbs to their true identities. They would never die again unless they chose to be reborn.

Aside from dead humans and the living things, there were also animal spirits. Long ago, a man named Thomas Aquinas reasoned that animals will not be in any kind of Afterlife because they do not have a true soul. It turns out he was wrong. While animals do not have the highest order soul of humans, they do have a *chiku* soul. These souls are basically constructed from emotions, needs, and instincts, and basically this boils down to the fact that your pets do indeed go to Heaven, but don't enter there intact. Most of us saw floating balls of light, but every now and then, one was a former pet in spirit form.

Ambrosia had a dog named Scratch who she didn't seem to see here because he was not a good dog, and a black cat known as Miss Kitty (like in the show Gunsmoke) who apparently had one of her yellow eyes removed for blindness; Miss Kitty lived for nearly 20 years and was well-loved by her family. She walked up and rubbed Miss Kitty's spirit by the ears. Azrael had a mouse called Nezumi, Watcher of the Tomb. Zoe had a white crow named Corvid-19, and a two-headed raven named Huginn And Muninn. They were nothing compared to my awesome hawk named Captain Falcon, though. Huginn And Muninn started biting each other, so Zoe moved over to her other pet. Miss Kitty half-heartedly chased Nezumi about before falling back to sleep. We gave our animals a pet before continuing on. We'd always be able to see them now, and they were as lively as souls as they had been in life.

Making our way to the center of the island, we arrived at a strange tent. The tent had an odd stone gate blocking entrance with a circular indentation. It appeared to require a small object, a small carved disc with from the looks of it some sort of triangular pattern.

What exactly is this? We heard a voice echo in our heads. And God said, *I have devised a test for you. On this island, there are two parts of a stone disc which will open this door. Find them, and I will grant you entrance.* Typical. Alright then, we'll play your game.

AZRAEL

I'm quite certain that how Heaven and Hell are on Earth will at some point need to be explained. Very well. This is a theory that I have learned of, and don't quote me, because it may be incorrect. The Seven Worlds Theory says that all of existence is divided into seven, just as we have Five Elements plus Light and Dark, there are roughly seven parts of the whole of things.

First, there are four lands called The World. Well, not counting weird dimensions, like a legendary place called the Eternal Town. But nevermind that, typically people in The World are in one of four places: Heaven, Hell, the New Earth, or the Realm of Void. Heaven or Hell, rather than being seen as places you go if you have been good are bad, are simply states of torment or bliss on the New Earth. Just as a person who has broken up can feel like they are in Hell and another who is about to be married may feel like they are in Heaven, they are right. But such places actually exist in physical form as well. As for the last of the these four, the Realm of Void is a world that used to be called the First Universe, and was a place where the original model of any thing that is natural was made, before getting copied as a mundane version. Gradually though, something happened, and this world became a place where things are instead constantly being destroyed. It is possible that one day things will change, but now it is a very dangerous place to visit.

Then there are two worlds which are denoted Beyond the World. These are historically called the World of Forms and the World of Spirit, but they would be better understood as the Afterlife and the Unseen World. The Unseen World is a blank expanse, usually either blank white or blank black, with positive or negative auras. That is, where God has presence, the “room” is usually white while it is usually black otherwise. The Reapers are permanent residents of this area, and use it as a sort of canvas for the physical world. After all, while God created the plans, the Reapers carry them out. Areas where Reapers and their Pales exist have some landscape, but usually not very much, more like islands in a sea of nothingness. On the other hand, the Afterlife could be seen as a sort of world in constant flux, a world that humans are able to manifest their desires and dreams. The Afterlife changes to whatever desires are put into it, but unless you know how to keep your fear and anger from overpowering your desires, you will be tormented not by God but by your own stray thoughts.

Finally, there is the area that is Beyond All Things. This is the area believed to be God's true dwelling, not a crude tent made with mortal hands. There is no adequate name for such a place. This was a world that overlapped into the other worlds. And so, it was like the Unseen World with its blank expanses, it was like the Afterlife with the anything created on the spot, and it was like The World. In fact, starting from the center which appeared as a small cozy house with a view all around it, as you traveled outward, you could visit anywhere. On the other hand, the reverse wasn't true, since only a select few who had conquered death knew how to enter this area. Hopefully, that cleared things up.

AMBROSIA

Despite being Oracle, I very seldom was able to predict stuff. Sure, I had that Predict ability, and could also kinda dodge a lot of stuff by going with the flow, but it wasn't a whole “Tomorrow, we're gonna catch flounder” type thing. I'm not sure destiny even works that way, so yeah. But in this case, I caught a glimpse of the two places. We had definitely seen both of them before. The first was the cave on the way up the mountain, and the second was that floating island we'd seen earlier. I decided to try the floating island first. I asked around, “Excuse me,” I continued, “excuse me, but I want to find something. There's that castle in the sky over there. I'm hoping to get to it.” I had to repeat this question several times. The angels were kind, yet very busy, and they were aware that this was my quest and thus my responsibility. Finally, I just bothered to ask a human. This one ran the transportation system for other humans and had some kind of beast master ability. “...So, can you help me?” I asked. She nodded, “Sure thing, just give me a moment.” She whistled and over came a roc. The roc was a horrendously big bird, a

creature with mostly reddish feathers, except for the red-golden gradient tail-feathers, which according to legend generated wind storms. It was able to stand up or sit on all fours, since it had not only wings but a pair of extra limbs for resting its weight on. The large bird yawned until she got on, petted it, and urged to head out.

The next thing, we were flying. Warping around earlier, we got to see the heavens, but this was a much different experience. The big bulky bird created a rush of wind with every flap of its wings, and it freaked me out just trying not to fall. The island came into view, meeting an island roughly three miles away in the span of a heartbeat. The island had enough area to land so we got off. The castle was an old style brick fort that was in ruins, the archway intact, and some of the gate was okay, but the turret was falling apart. As we entered, we made our way past bats. It's hard to believe at one point even rats represented a legitimate threat against me, but now I could effortlessly knock bats unconscious with my fishing pole. We entered further and just as effortlessly knocking aside valknuts and necromancers. I couldn't believe how strong our journey had made us. Those valknuts had given us such trouble before, now I just blasted them all with the Four Gods Crest before the others even drew their weapons.

At last, we came to our opponents, a group of Iron Golems. These were tough. It wasn't a matter of training harder or getting stronger either, they had resistant skin that was so thick that most of our weapons bounced off. Most of our weapons were very rustproof, they were designed of materials that hurt the supernatural, and very fine weapons. But against creatures made from such thick metal, this was worthless. Water magic did no good. They didn't have internal cogs, gears, hydraulics of the like. Electricity also was worthless. There was nothing internal. I didn't know what to do.

AQORM

The others were at a loss to defeat a creature that didn't seem to have any known weakness, and any motor or main power source. Fortunately for them, beating the golems wasn't strictly necessary. There was enough space in the room to just skirt around these things, and the object was in a treasure chest, so while the others got whacked a bunch of times, I just moved past them and grabbed the treasure. “Let's go,” I said, rushing past them again. Elias was frantically healing to keep the others healthy while they tried to flee, so I grabbed him too so he wouldn't be left behind. We boarded the roc and headed back to Heaven. It was a bit of a rough ride, though.

After a bit, we collected ourselves and walked back down the mountain, spotting a small cave on the way. Caves form for many reasons, I had found out from centuries of reading. Some caves are simply formed when decaying plants mixed with rainwater to create carbonic acid, and digested some of the rock. Others are formed as a result of mining for oil, gems, or metallic ore. Still others were formed by snakes, moles, and other such creatures. This one was formed by seawater hitting the same spot over and over, wearing down the rock to sand. As the water caved in weaker sections, it began to branch out into winding paths... nah, I'm just making all this up. Aside from the sandy entrance, the sand absorbed most of the rest of the water, so these later sections were carved out by people or things wanting to make home there. To the left, there was a nice spring, but I noticed there were a few skeletons near the water, so we wisely decided not to drink. We retraced our steps back to the right path, avoiding spiders and bats and sand-sharks as we made our way to the center of the mountain. The sand-sharks were particularly troublesome, we had to watch for fins or those ankle-biters would jump at us.

Finally, the sandy soil gave way to rockier ground, and we were safe from many of these creatures. We entered a long rocky corridor that twisted about here and there, as we heard insane cackling in the background. “They thought I was mad. They called me a mere puppet! But I'll show them. Mwahahaha!!!” the voice echoed from the other room.

But we had bigger things to worry about. Some shady characters appeared nearby, pulling strings of bunraku puppets with knives and swords. They had clunky moments, but as much as we attacked them, the puppeteers just pulled the strings and they got back up. No big deal. I swiftly moved past, cutting the strings. I admit, normally I expect such puppets to collapse without strings. Not so here. Apparently something had given them a sort of life, probably through all the runes the puppeteers had used on these strings. Once

freed, they turned of those who had controlled them. Let that be a lesson to all of you. Don't be harsh to people, and treat them like puppets. I guess that's the moral?

In any case, we made it to the next room. The crazy guy was there, looking every bit like a sort of puppet himself. He'd even tied strings to his back, and was basically animating himself by holding the strings in various ways. “I see you have defeated my puppets,” he boasted, “well, behold, you face... The greatest puppet of all!!!” Ambrosia smirked, “That's nothing to boast about.”

In the background, he had a piano playing a tune. Although much of society today was more involved with alchemy and thaumaturgy than any sort of technology, pianos and other musical instruments were a bit of an exception. They required only a few parts, were mainly wood or metal, and because of the way runes worked, they could be embedded on the instruments. Some warded off undead or the like when they played, but player pianos using sheets was also a thing, since runes were simply written symbols. This one was playing an old tune from Metallica, I think it was called? It seemed to be oddly apropos, but I couldn't tell you why.

The puppet was fast enough that the chest behind him couldn't be reached. Worse, his movements were disjointed enough that all of us had to stay on our toes. We couldn't really dodge him and had to block, but when we used magic or tried to counterattack, the puppet would suddenly move at odd angles, and our attacks hit empty air. Nevras pulled us into the narrower corridor, explaining that the puppet king would likely have a harder time following us, and called us to discuss strategy. After all, this thing was tough to even hit given the way it moved.

NEVRAS

We had one part of the disc that granted passage to God's dwelling, we just needed the other one. And so, I called the others into a huddle with Azrael setting a kekkai to screen off the area from attack. After this, we looked at its strengths and weaknesses. On the one hand, it was hard to hit, its body was built to take a lot of punishment, and was very very flexible. On the other hand... “Okay, here's the plan,” I said. And we discussed all this offscreen so it could not possibly fail.

AMBROSIA

None of what he said made any sense. Nevras went off privately to tell each of the group members some sort of task. I heard my plan, “I want you to do some fly fishing. When it's time to cut the strings, you'll know what to do.” Uhhh, actually, I didn't know what to do. And based on what I'd seen of the others they'd also been given equally strange plans. Everyone fanned out with most of the group on the left or middle, with Azrael the farthest right. I was in the middle but slightly back, because Nevras told me where to stand to be safe.

From what I saw, Elias was sitting still and muttering something while holding his staff in a guard position. Azrael had just finished some kind of spell, and it clearly didn't work, whatever it was, so now she was doing something else. I didn't notice any major change besides the air feeling very heavy from all the magic around. From the looks of it, the plan involved standing totally still and goofing off. Only Nevras appeared to be working, chasing the creature around with his shiny new sword. When he managed to catch up to it though, he only tapped it lightly with the flat of his sword. What was he doing? Azrael suddenly felt the strain of whatever spell she was doing, because she was on the ground with exhaustion. I guess whatever spell she'd cast must still have some kind of offensive aura because it didn't dare get closer. In fact, it suddenly shifted away. Aqorm encountered it second, having it suddenly fly straight to her. She stabbed it somewhere in the arm, but it didn't seem to do much good. Somehow or other, she'd lost both of her knives, one of them embedded in the creature's left arm, so she dodged out of the way. Zoe was next to be attacked. She had been the worst about goofing off, apparently her waiting to be in position to attack had caused her to become bored and she had juggled her scythe. A mishap had torn a long string of skin off as a scar, and she had blood and flesh all over her scythe. She had healed up her face but didn't seem to have much time to wipe it off before the puppet flew towards her right fist extended. She

slashed at it quite a few times, in the arms, legs, torso, and even the neck, but whatever she cut off, it just reattached the joints to. Well, at least now her scythe was clean.

When she realized she couldn't beat it after all, she whacked it away with the back of the blade, knocking it towards me. Uh oh! I had been instructed to continue waving around my rod, no matter what, so I moved it faster, hoping with any luck I'd be able to tie it up. No such thing happened, as it apparently backpedaled when it saw what I was doing. My arm was beginning to hurt a lot. In the start, this felt like a simple matter, but now it felt like I was pulling my rod through spider's webs or something, I was straining to move. It looked like the puppet was also slowing down from the fight.

As it moved away from me, it unfortunately moved a bit close to Elias. He was a sitting duck! Somehow Elias managed to move just fast enough to hit him with his staff. The puppet began to bloat up with odd growths on its arms, legs, torso, and neck. I wasn't sure what was going on, but I was tired of moving around my fishing rod so I pulled it back to me to rest my arm for a second. Or tried to. Instead, it felt like I had tangled my line around itself. I jerked harder, attempting to pull it closer to get a good look at it, but I was pretty well surprised when I started pulling the puppet towards me. “Get back!” I shouted, waving my knife around. It felt like I cut something, as all of a sudden the puppet flew at me full speed and almost whacked me in the head. My terror went away when I noticed it wasn't moving anymore though.

I didn't understand what had happened. “Okay, seriously,” I asked now that the evil puppet thingy lay still, “what exactly was our plan?” Nevras smiled, “Remember those iron golems earlier? They didn't have any sort of power source. Iron golems usually are either the robots from long ago with mechanical gears and engines and such, or the alchemical kind with simple joints and a large gem that has some kinda rune thingy. But those were just hunks of metal. Then I saw that the puppet was pulling its own strings. It moved almost like it was guided by something else. So I asked the others, especially Azrael.” Azrael explained next, “I figured one of two things was possible. Either it was controlled by runes or there were hidden strings. I cast Disjoin Runes for the first one, but you saw that nothing happened right? So, next I used Increase Density, and then focused the strongest part of it on myself. That's why I was pinned to the floor, and that's why it couldn't come closer. The string on my end broke from the sudden weight.” Nevras elaborated, “With those strings cut it was an easy matter to lead the puppet into Aqorm's waiting arms.” Confused, I asked, “You mean Nevras was herding the puppet? And what exactly did you do?” Aqorm filled me in, “My job, strictly speaking was pretty simple. The puppet was far too flexible. It had two hands that were strong, and double-jointed. I stabbed my knife through its elbow and knee,” she said, collecting the knives from it, “so that the joints wouldn't move properly. Whatever strings they were using, as the string pulled the arm in order to grab or punch something, the joints couldn't fully shift, and it would pop back. The arms and legs couldn't move effectively as a result.” I looked at Zoe who was still busy healing up her face. I had to ask, “And you? Zoe, seriously, what were you thinking, trying to juggle your scythe?” She grinned sheepishly, all parts of her face not scarred up or bruised one massive blush, “I can actually juggle my scythe just fine. This was **meant** to happen.”

“Huh?” I said. Elias stepped in, “Zoe and I were working together on the same plan. Observe,” he said, pointing to several large growths on its body, “Zoe removed some of her skin and blood with that 'accident' then she stabbed the puppet at key locations. I hit it with my staff and sent the spell through that.” What is that, anyway? “What is that, anyway?” I repeated aloud. “That,” he explained, “is cancer.” He noted my blank stare, “Something that barely exists anymore, thanks to a lack of processed food, radiation, and the State trying to poison people. Only unskilled wonder-workers attempting to do regeneration effects ever encounter it nowadays. Regeneration works by replicating cells at a fast pace. Any decent healer understands how to do this properly. Those without skill ironically make more impressive-looking healing happen, but later on, the healing doesn't taper off but actually overshoots its intended function, resulting in deformed growths and draining from the immune system. The result is a slow and painful death ironically caused by healing. This is pretty much what we did to this, we filled it with growths until it couldn't move.” I nodded, understanding, “So you killed it with this cancer. Got it.”

Nevras shook his head, “Ummm, no. From what I understand of cancer, it only hurts living things. We just slowed it down, you stopped it.”

Now I was really confused. “What?!? When???” I asked. Everyone sighed, like I had missed some great secret. Well, to be fair, they'd basically been whispered parts of some strategy while I'd been told just the basic instruction of “wave your fishing pole around. I dunno why I even bothered, that thing almost killed me. “Okay, so while I was chasing it all around, normally there'd be strings on both sides making sure the puppet didn't get tangled. But Azrael cut the ones to the right. Then I got it to run around in circles, and finally, you caught it while waving your pole around as it got near you. When you pulled, you yanked the invisible strings and when you waved your knife, you cut it. I couldn't tell you anything, Ambrosia. It was a kind of dumb luck thing that I needed you to do naturally, or you wouldn't pull right.” I grumbled at him, glaring the entire trip back up the mountain. I brightened when I saw Heaven again, because it was just so pretty. I sighed in ecstasy until a lobster bug pinched my nose. Stop that, you!

Moving to the tent, we placed the two keys in the door, then tried turning left and right until it opened. We weren't prepared for what we saw, though...

CHAPTER 23

In which Ambrosia talks to God. And actually gets a response.

GOD

The tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao. The name that can be named is not the eternal Name. The unnamable is the eternally Real. Naming is the origin of all common things. Ambrosia's description of my majesty or the scene she saw will go undescribed, except for the rudimentary facts of the encounter.

Long ago, the Jews refused to make idols of me. This is because like those following the Tao, they understood that to delve too deeply into description of ultimate things is to fundamentally rob it of its truest self. In fact, too much explanation can make the writer long-winded or confused. Yet just as Lao Tzu eventually had to share his knowledge, limited description was still necessary.

As before, she saw a floating triangle shape in midair. Just as the Star of David had to suffice for the Jews, symbols are an effective tool for seeing what is beyond comprehension. The room wasn't the same white empty room as before but rather they had stepped into a tent foolishly expecting the inside of a tent, and instead they encountered a cliffside with me floating over it (straight out of a 1992 puzzle-adventure game artwork on page 4 of the manual). But this is only a comparison, the same way as a scene of a man carrying a woman is only an imitation of *Pietà* by Michelangelo.

Nearby were my angels, Michael, Gabriel, Cassiel, Estheriel, Raphael, and Uriel. Most of these were blond or white haired, with the exception of Uriel, who was also the only purebred Seraphim left in attendance among my archangels. Most of them were also extremely pretty, since it calmed people they had to speak with.

There's Uriel, an archangel with black wings. Of all archangels in my tent, Uriel is the only Seraphim left who was a child of two other Seraphim. His wings are typically darker than most archangels, and his jobs are many and varied. Usually, though he acts as a sort of watchman against misfortune. Uriel was archangel most known for the big ticket stuff, he was present during a number of floods, rises and falls of major empires, cosmic events, and so on. He refused to talk to the group. It wasn't, as you might imagine, a matter of him feeling too important for little people like humans. Nor was it shyness. When Uriel talked, he generally talked about his work, which he loved. There was simply no frame of reference that those trying to talk to him would understand, so he kept silent. Ultimately, they gave up in frustration.

Gabriel was the opposite extreme, telling them about his mission as a key messenger. Some of these messages were contradictory. Technically, all angels deliver messages, as the word angel literally means “message.” Satan's role is also as a messenger called the Accuser. His job is to bring the message that humans are horrible people and deserve to die. I know, it's a shitty message. But it helps motivate people. If Michael is the military

commander of archangels, Gabriel is like the postmaster general in a post office, organizing messages to be delivered (this included not-so-good messages such as Justin Bieber memes). He was at his best when world-changing events are about to happen. These may not always seem to be in humanity's best interest, but typically these messages serve a larger historical plan. Some of Gabriel's messages were to warn of Uriel's activities. A seven-year famine in Egypt, for instance, would have been deadly if people didn't get advanced warning about it.

Then there's Raphael. This archangel is for healing, and for protection. Raphael had returned recently, and was eyeing Azrael's sword Raphael, telling her to be careful with it, since it was one of a kind. Not that much of anything could actually hurt the sword, but such swords were possible to abuse by worthless owners. I didn't suspect her as one, however. Raphael's sword had been used to banish Adam and Eve from Eden.

Cassiel was the archangel of tears. Yes, I understand that this sounds vaguely like Aquaman's powers, that is to say incredibly lame, but actually he had an important duty. Cassiel mitigates human suffering. Because among archangels he was the only one that could feel as strongly as humans, he was chosen to govern the process of rebirth. He also brought rain. But this wasn't all. Cassiel had a gift from Yomi, the Reaper of Death, known as the Sword of Sorrow. This long katana had an even longer chain attached to the handle with a metallic broken heart at the end. The sword had several powers, including the ability to raise the dead.

Estheriel was the most troublesome among the archangels in my tent. Like Lucifer, he and I had a number of disagreements; however, he wasn't jealous of humans. Rather, he was too kind and far too interested in justice. He didn't seem to understand why human suffering had to exist. I could tell eventually that I was going to have a problem with him. Our visitors listened to him rant about me for a little while. Eventually though, they moved on and they saw Michael blocking the path.

ELIAS

This situation felt vaguely familiar.

AMBROSIA

Some big oaf was blocking my path. I mean, he wasn't actually that big, he was actually kinda frail looking, but anyway! He had long curly light blond hair, he was willowy like a woman, and had a toga that reached to about knee length. In his hand was a cruciform sword, with a very wide guard, and a blade long enough to put a hole in me and three people behind me. He didn't look very menacing, but you know, I'd seen all the strange things these guys could do, and frankly it scared me.

I tried to ask him politely to pass. “Greetings,” he said, in a soft high voice, “I am Michael, Guardian of the Trinity, Preserver of the Way of Christianity, and Oracle of Light. How can I help?” I may have kinda sorta missed the point of what he just said, as I asked him, “Wait you're a Christian? I thought they died off when Belial last came.” He shook his head, as if I'd said something foolish, “Well, that's not entirely true. The town of Kushiyama has managed to revive it on a small scale, with help from me. Jesus was a good influence on it too.” Oh right, yeah, we even met the guy. “But besides, as near to God as we are now, nobody can really deny the truth of any religion. Speaking of which, are you at all religious?” he asked me point-blank.

I can't say that I'm religious, but I'm not an atheist either. I told him, “Umm, yea, I guess so.” He turned kinda stern there, “I don't think 'sort of' is quite good enough for my liking. How about this, you can surrender yourself to God, or burn in eternal torment for being weak-faithed.” This hand of his glowed with an awesome power. I was kinda wanting to, ever so slowly, run like my life depended on it, because I wasn't sure it didn't. Aqorm stated the obvious, “Ummm, Ambrosia, this guy is kind of intense.” We motioned him to take this outside somewhere, as we didn't want innocent angels involved. And God said, *LET THERE BE A BATTLEGROUND WITH WHICH TO SETTLE THINGS.* And it was so. We appeared outside in a fluffy white cloudy platform suitable for fighting.

Zoe and Aqorm tried to attack him. But their weapons kinda bounced off his skin, as though there were a thin coating around his body. He only seriously reacted to Nevras, Azrael, and me because most of the others had largely mundane weapons. Aqorm tried to

use geomancy, but something felt weird. She tried again. Michael laughed, “It's called geomancy for a reason. Your power uses ley lines drawn mainly from the ground below you. But Heaven has no soil, no ley lines, until you can draw energy from the air itself, you shall never attack me.” Aqorm sulked, feeling impotent. Zoe was next, calling out elemental spells and directing it at him. “*Fire! Ice! Thunder!*” she called in rapid succession, after Michael dodged some of these. It is said that angels fly as gracefully as doves, but honestly doves fly kinda goofy. From what I saw later, the way an angel flies is more like an eagle, able to quickly shift from upright flight to a dive, and powerful enough to grab and toss stuff in midair. But his regular movement was actually more impressive. If it were to be compared to a bird, it was more like a hummingbird, as Michael pivoted and dodged all three spells at such speed that he seemed to be vibrating on a higher wavelength from everything else. With a shift of his elbow, Michael pressed down hard with his wings generating lift enough to get above the rest of us. He looked prepared to dive at us, drawing his sword. But he didn't get a chance to finish.

“*Increase Density!*” Azrael called. But this too missed. As large as Azrael's spell was, Michael was simply moving too fast. That wasn't what took him down. Vines snaked up from every corner, grasping and pulling him down. He managed to dodge quite a few of these, but then one caught his arm, and then his other arm, and then finally his legs. “H-how?” he asked Aqorm, “how did you...?” Aqorm shook her head, “Don't underestimate me. I know all about ley lines. It's a weakness that elves have. But we have ways around it. For instance, if I'm really desperate, I can draw geomancy from my own life energy. It'll probably kill me, but it depends how desperate I am. And more to the point... did you know that the Earth doesn't just have ley lines below it? It also has a magnetic field above it. But I've never been high enough to use this. Until now.” Zoe tried to follow up with an Ice spell, but Michael raised one hand and said, “***Orbiting Defender - Radius: 5 ft.***”

This was unlike other spells that I saw before. I never saw any runes. Instead, a ball of light simply appeared around Michael and started orbiting around him. The ball sort of whacked the incoming spell, pushing it aside before reaching him. This might not protect against radius effects, but this was enough to keep him safe from smaller-scale spells.

Nevras and Azrael tried to attack this guy, but despite the vines constraining him, he still proved to be very slippery, ducking at just the right moment for them to almost attack each other. As it was, they tripped over his body and rolled, until Nevras wound up in a heap under Azrael. Hey! You shameless hussy, get off my man!

NEVRAS

Azrael had a pretty soft body, I can see why those two are always cuddling. But she's not really my type, and besides which I don't really know her. I dodged a stray lightning bolt that God had apparently lost control of.

After picking ourselves up, we tried again, this time being careful to stay on the same side or fight back to back. Michael was unbelievably fast, almost like we were moving in slow motion. The best approach was ironically not to try to outrun him, since as we had just found out we had no way of coordinating with each other on the split second, but to be slow and cautious with everything but defense. Slow and steady, huh? I suddenly realized that the blacksmith who fought with me was actually holding back. This was a real test of strength and skill, and so far we were failing. “Everyone, duck for cover,” I called out. Magic tended to be mostly fixed in the way it worked. A Fire spell could only be narrowed and widened by someone extremely skillful and above all strong-willed. On the other hand, techniques were basically dictates by speed and strength, and could be different from person to person. It was not only possible, but relatively easy to adjust my techniques. For instance, Jump Thrust became Standing Jump Thrust, and Void Slice could also be Void Spin. Right now, I was trying out Whirling Jump Thrust, doing a midair triple axel while spinning my sword, making a whirlwind attack to knock him out of the sky. As it turned out, it did connect, but I'm pretty sure I will never try that again, after flopping on the ground hard on by buttocks. It also destroyed all of those vines earlier. He was knocked on the ground, but quickly dusted himself off and charged forward, sending both of us flying with the flat of his sword.

Ambrosia tried to rush him with her First Iron dagger, but he twisted his sword around and disarmed her, causing the knife to fall to the cloudy ground. She tried to pick it up, but he was too fast to allow her that opportunity, rushing forward with his sword. It was then that I saw the differences in the way they moved. I had always thought that Ambrosia had become faster or more graceful following her training under Lao Tzu but now I understood. In the face of someone actually reacting faster, she was close to normal speed, she was simply moving in the flow of the moment using her sense of prophecy to indirectly anticipate events. Michael was moving so fast that his actions were nearly a blur, yet Ambrosia with simple but precise sidesteps, pivots, and even what seemed to be accidental tumbles, somehow danced her way out of every strike from Michael. Michael swung his sword down, and Ambrosia dodged left. Michael slashed across to cut her torso, and Ambrosia ducked just then to pick up her knife. Michael said the words, "***Hard Laser - Cone: 1 ft to 30 ft***" and suddenly a laser blast blasted from his index and middle finger gradually widening until most of us had to run out of the way from an area about the size of a shed. Ambrosia was fine however, she had somehow slid under his entire attack, doing a split in the process. "Nice try, however..." Michael suddenly stabbed her point-blank, running her through with his sword. As her last moments, I saw her arms waving about apparently frantically. "Ambrosia! No!!!" I heard myself scream as I saw him pulling the blade out of her.

JESUS

God, in his role as narrator, asked me to insert this passage here simply to provide suspense. As much as it pains me to do so sometimes, I have always tried to obey my Father's commands. And so, I have decided to prove you readers with a slice-of-life segment while you worry about Ambrosia's fate. And yes, my Father could simply Reset time, but if this were done too often, other humans might start to become reckless. Maybe this time he didn't do it?

In this world, my role is often greatly misunderstood. You see, many people think of me as a single historical figure who died once for all, and that's all there is to the story. But they forget all of those passages about how I'd often appear in the form of "the least of these" as random people who needed help, not to mention where it said that I was "in the beginning with God." To say nothing of all the mentions about how the disciples "did not recognize" me because I was different after the resurrection. The truth is, I had long since come again with the Resurrection, but the public didn't really get this, until the so-called "Second Coming." Before the Earth was created anew, I often appeared under different forms before and after my historical life and had a host of different names. Sometimes, I was just another mortal, sometimes I appeared as a teacher, and sometimes I was someone beyond the limits of humans.

There were far less problems to this New Earth, yet a fact of life is that there will always be a few in pathetic circumstances, because they didn't understand how to receive blessings. That is to say, atheists had cool antimagic powers but had the unfortunate side-effect of a life that had no miracles to speak of. To them, Earth had not really changed, and was as depressing as the old one. In fact, their brains filtered out all thaumaturgy, explaining away such things as luck or privilege.

It's not that Father was judging them or anything. They were getting in their own way. By rejecting the world where thaumaturgy worked and miracles happened for those with a strong desire, they could only see the absence of such things, and lived in a world where everyone else seemed to have what they needed. They on the other hand could only see the injustice of how they were left out of such a place, since their unbelief warded off any ability to ask for good events.

And so it was, that the average healer or priest couldn't help them, and they were sick or poor or rejected wretches that could only be helped by me. Sometimes I appeared as an anonymous benefactor dressed in a cloak, sometimes I appeared as their peers in order to be a true friend to them. And sometimes, I was just a random person who showed up.

I'm not constantly saving the world. I'm active in festivals, concerts, and banquets as the guests or the entertainment, or sometimes the waiters. This time, there was an Annual Pork Roast in Ghobli. Ghobli had set up stalls with pork kebabs, pork barbecue, pig-iron

forged into little pig necklaces and earrings, pork-fried rice, and a large pot of some sort of stew. There was singing and dance, and I appeared this day as a blond woman with long curls. I sang some country/rock love songs.

At one point during the festival, a group of about ten people got on the roof and threatened to jump. In the confusion of the crowd, I was able to disappear without anyone noticing, and I managed to get to the ledge where they were. Despite what you see in movies, it is harder to talk people out of suicide than you might think. Yes, there is an element of extreme sadness to it, but what surprises most people is that there are also huge amounts of unfocused anger. The suicidal person sometimes wants to hurt those around them, seeing them to blame for their suffering. Between sadness, anger, and other things, it is actually difficult to gauge what words I would need to say to resolve this situation. I could tell them everything about themselves, and show them why their life was so much more valuable than they thought. I could guilt-trip them about how the crowd in turn would be traumatized and probably follow them to some degree, and to think about what they were doing. Though, usually that one didn't work so well. And I was done trying to make followers, since right now I was just a singer. And so, I sang *Jumper* by Third Eye Blind. They kinda hated it, and all of them jumped in front of me.

Even I get depressed sometimes, and have to be cheered up. This was one of these times. But I knew better than to hurt others, so I dealt with it privately later. I couldn't prevent the tragedy, I could only deal with the aftermath now. But since I was supposed to be in character, I asked the crowd to go back to the festival. I got help from the medics by whispering who I really was, and they agreed to carry the stretcher to somewhere private. But first, a lot of people had been impacted by this. I spent the next hour or two singing soothing music to try to relieve the trauma of what happened from their minds. Finally, I headed over to the place that these healers had mentioned.

These jumpers were dead, all right. They had been since they hit the ground. Buildings weren't terribly tall these days, but you didn't need that much height to shatter your spine or split open your head. I sighed, then I began my work. "*Katayla, arise and walk. Samantha, you too, come on you lazy bum. Terrianne, I need you up too*." I called all ten of them in turn by name, they opened their eyes and looked at me, a musician who had somehow saved them from death. They still had many of their wounds, but bringing them back from death did make these heal just enough for their body to function.

Some were grumpy because they didn't want to be brought back. Some refused to believe anything had happened and just saw themselves as having a sprain, limping off despite telling them that in fact they had been dead. Still others got angry with me when I tried to tell them about loved ones missing them, and others figured out who I was but believed that I wanted them to become Christian or something. Actually, I would have been happy if they just got their lives on track, and stopped hurting themselves.

Of the ten, only one seemed changed by this experience. A girl named Taylor with brownish hair and blond highlights, wearing a gray top, black pants, and some fuzzy boots had looked back at where she jumped, and realized how lucky she was to be alive. She saw the experience as a new lease on life, and decided to meet more people and live with more joy. She kinda hugged me and also asked for my number, so I guess I was on a date for next week. She apparently knew who I was too, because she said, "Come as a boy next time and I'll know it's you, because you're wearing something blue." I think she used to be a poet before she went all suicidal.

MICHAEL

I have lived around God for centuries, and one thing I have learned is the truth of things not always being as they seem. I saw her use my Oracle Crest just as I stabbed her. She performed the Cloud Hands stance admirably, moving her hands despite being in tremendous pain. My Crest gave her powers over healing and justice, absorbing the damage that would otherwise be lethal and storing it in her hands. Rising from a split, she struck me with her palm and all of the pain I had been willing to inflict upon her was suddenly redirected back to me. It kinda sucked.

The energy went out of her palms, returning them to normal, her hands still glowed with brilliance. I knew about my Oracle powers, though I seldom used them. Unlike most

of the Oracle Crests, mine was mostly short-range. The Crest connected the person using it with their target, but it could be prevented by various obstructions. If they couldn't strike back in time, they took full damage and would possibly die. But it also was able to heal and keep the user alive while it lasted. She whacked me with her hands at various tai chi moves, and each touch injured me and healed her. The stab through her stomach was soon gone, while at my end there were several heavy bruises. Not to worry though, angels are pretty tough against physical attacks after all.

I was about to congratulate her, when Ambrosia launched into a long drawn out speech about how wrong I was. Well, I suppose I can be a bit zealous. She told me, "I can't abide that kind of thinking. If you surrender yourself, service to God is no longer your own will, your own choice. If the only way to get 'saved' as you put it is to forfeit your own life, we might as well all be doomed, because being saved is not much different from being a zombie." Deep philosophical musing was apparently a contagious condition, for I responded, "But... if you don't surrender to an outside force, aren't you serving yourself, no matter what you worship as a religion?" She shook her head, then continued her debate, "That's why... humans should serve God or whatever they believe in only as their own choice, not because someone else told them to. It's like the Tao, you need to strike a balance between worship and free will. I think that's why we got free will in the first place, so we could believe as we will, and it would be all the better if it's real." I felt like she was talking about religion less as a set of rules to be obeyed, and more as a sort of relationship.

I smiled. This girl was interesting to me. I had lived all my life at God's side, yet this girl was showing me something completely new and unexpected. Just who was she? I said, "You humans are interesting creatures. I think I'll follow you and learn more about the world. By the way..." I touched her hand and lent her my Crest. Ordinarily, Oracles taught Oracle powers, so they could keep them as well. But it was better if she had it for now, so that she could save her life in the past. And yes, this made sense to me.

I stepped aside now that our battle was done and we were back in God's tent, and let her approach God's presence. She was in awe. Collecting herself, she looked around at the area we were standing in and exclaimed, "God, it's so amazing!" God told her, *Remember, don't use God's name for frivolous things. Ask only questions you truly care about. It's one of my Commandments, after all. I Am Guardian of Heaven and Earth, Maker of All Things, the Light and Dark of the Universe. I Am not the god of faraway, but within the space between two people, and even the Void deep within the heart. I Am Love and I Am Sorrow. I Am Nowhere and Everywhere. I Am who I Am. What do you wish to know?*

She asked him, "I have heard that Christianity is a loving and peaceful religion, where everyone is welcomed. But in the same breath, anyone who doesn't accept Jesus is supposedly treated as a pariah, since only Jesus is the way to salvation. How can this be?"

I sighed. I hated such questions. God took it in stride though, responding, *You have asked wisely. Humans play favorites, in terms of people and religion, but I have made only two rules of worship: You love me with your whole heart, and you love others as you love yourself. The Ten Commandments are based on these two, as I Am Love. All these laws concern treating others with love. It is true that I said Jesus is the Way to salvation, but you must understand, your God is One. And I Am Love. All who put Love before other petty concerns, and strive to live the religion as an expression of that Love, follow Jesus and follow me, despite their dogma.*

He continued, *That said, I can speak directly to humanity without need of intervention. I am omnipotent. Jesus is an offering for your sins, not a requirement to see me. In fact, he sundered the Temple curtain so now there is no more division between God and humanity. I favor interacting with mankind through nature's weather, and through the advice of people. After all, I could use Jesus, but those who say Jesus spoke to them are met with distrust. There are many that claim to be paths to God, but there is only one Way to God. Regardless of religion, only by building a Personal Relationship with me can one connect to me, not by following laws. This is what I mean when I say Jesus is the only way to God.*

She asked other questions, "I have another question. Why does bad stuff happen to good people in this world?" This time God sighed. He told her, *It is for the same reason as evil exists in this world. Aside from the Tao being part of my very fabric, evil exists because it is*

part of the nature of free will. Even I cannot interfere. Ambrosia looked puzzled, "You can't interfere?!? I thought you were omnipotent. What's the problem?" God explained, *You've heard about the logical paradox about whether I can create a stone that I am unable to lift? Well, it's true, and it isn't a paradox. The true test of power is whether you can create something beyond yourself. The answer to this question is potential. You can design a rock that is only able to be lifted by training the body. I choose to limit my power so that others may rise to the challenge.*

She asked yet another question, this one about relationships. "What about... those two?" she said, pointing to Azrael and Zoe. They blushed. God answered, *Ah yes, homosexual relationships. In the beginning, I chose Adam and Eve to represent a marriage. These were male and female, and they were supposed to show that my plan for marriage was to make children and raise families. I have been told by many of my followers that "God Hates Gays." This is news to me, for I love all my creations. But I do expect them to understand that homosexuality is a sin. But all are sinners, all are in need of my forgiveness. If humans are able to accept their sin, and embrace my forgiveness and grace, I'm not sure whether I have a complaint. While two males can only have sex for pleasure, I have seen the plight of battered women, and have given them the means for reproduction through fingering. This is a small miracle that I could share to those who no longer trust men.* She asked God, "But, you're saying that you value lesbians over gay males. Isn't all love equal?" God scoffed, *That notion is bullshit.* She looked confused that God would us such a word, but he continued, *I am a male, am I not? There are many straight males that still enjoy watching two women have sex. Yet those same males would be utterly disgusted at the idea of a male receiving anal sex. Two women can nurture children, yet two men … that would be an abomination to a man like me.* Ambrosia scowled. This might be God saying this, but it was also an opinion.

Finally, she wanted to know, "One last question." This time God could tell what it was, because it was her deepest desire. *You want to know about your parents*, God remarked. *Your mother was named Manna Leaven, and she works in an old church. She mainly does repair work, trying to get new members*. "And my father?" Ambrosia queried. God fell silent for a moment. *I'm sorry*, he said, *I cannot tell you about that*.

She was about to walk off, when God said, *Wait, show me that*. "What?" Ambrosia asked. ***That!!!*** he said, poking her fishing rod with a giant hand descending from above. She tumbled a bit. "Huh? It's just a fishing rod, I've had it since..." Ambrosia was cut off as God finished her sentence, *since you were a child, correct?* She looked puzzled. *That*, he said, *is a gift from me. It is known as Conception. Have you noticed that as long as the rod needs to be, it extends its string? As strong as it needs to be, it is? I want you to think of it as another object.* Suddenly, the fishing rod changed its shape into a fishing spear. It wasn't much difference in purpose but it was proof that what God said was true. *Go, my children, and accomplish your mission.*

Apparently still favoring a fishing rod, she reverted the weapon back. The group walked out of God's tent in silence, down the mountain, and headed back to the boat.

CHAPTER 24

In which Ambrosia gathers the materials to summon the Eternal Dragon.

MICHAEL

Humans always say things like, "If I had no problems, I would be so happy, and just want to stay like that forever." The truth is, we walked down the mountain, and despite the fact that the weather was less pleasant, the smell of soil was dirtier, people were dying, and everyone we were likely to meet would not automatically be kind, nobody felt an immediate urge to return to Heaven.

Instead, we boarded our boat and headed due east. From Ambrosia's limited directions, it appeared that her next goal was the island where Hell was, so I helped her find it based on what I had known of the island. We did indeed find it, but it seems my information had been incomplete.

The Island Closest To Hell was indeed an inhospitable land with active volcanoes, clouds of putrid sulfur gas, and decaying landscape. The entire island was covered with

jagged rocks, including the shoreline. There was no way to enter by sea. “Uhhhh, I apologize in advance for complaining,” I said, while Ambrosia looked at me funny. Apparently, she'd never heard anyone do that. I continued, “But I think we're going to have a problem. We can only get there by air.” She asked me, “Couldn't you fly us there? I mean, you do have wings. And last I checked, angels aren't supposed to get tired.” I shook my head, “It still wouldn't work. If our world map is correct, this shows about 50 miles of flying for the thinnest stretch of mountain. I can only carry one person at a time, and my wings while doing so reduce my speed to about 1 mph, so that's 100 miles for a round trip for me. There's six of you so, that's going to take nearly a month. And with nobody watching the boat, and rocky shores, we'd probably have a shipwreck or worse.” Aqorm commented, “You're a pessimist, aren't you?” I shook my head, “No, I'm a realist. I've already come up with a plan. To the western region, there's an Island known as Dragon Island which...” Ambrosia had apparently heard this story too, because her face dawned with recognition. “To Dragon Island!” she shouted. So intense...

Azrael, Zoe, and I took turns pumping the sailboat with gusts of powerful wind. I could not tire, as Ambrosia had said, but I could lose faith if I worked too long on something. Periodically, I had to meditate and pray, and the others had to rest for their magic. By doing this task in shifts, we were able to make the island in record time, although slowing down to docking speed was still something that needed doing. With some effort, we managed to not overshoot our destination, and tied up the boat to the coast of the island.

AMBROSIA

The temperature of the island was freezing cold, at least as bad as the island where the temple of Thanatos was. In fact, as close as we were to the West Pole, we would need to get indoors fast. All of us except Michael, whose golden aura glowed in the snow, dove into the lower decks to desperately try to warm up again. “***Summon Clothing - Quantity: Six people, Attributes: Cold weather resistance.***” Out of thin air, fur coats, gloves, and hats materialized, apparently being woven from light itself. We hurriedly put them on, and trudged out slowly in the active blizzard. We were still chilly, but we warmed up by standing near Michael. I wasn't crushing on him, but this androgynous male with such a warm aura just felt so good to be near. Nevras glared at me. Was he jealous?

The snow was inches thick and it was a struggle not to lose clothing to it. We also had to worry about twisting our arms and legs trying to plod through stuff. No, all this gear didn't come with snowshoes. And no, we didn't get any goggles either. Aside from his weapon, it appeared what Michael could make was limited to natural materials. It didn't appear he could make glass or plastic, ceramics, or space age materials. It also didn't seem like Michael could make money, which suddenly explained the whole Record of Value thing. And from what I saw, he couldn't make much in the way of food, unless we wanted to be eating nothing but seeds. But all the same, this was some nice fabric.

At some point after hurting my ankles plodding through the snow, I remembered I had an Oracle Crest that dealt with adapting to extreme weather. I summoned forth my power and we were surrounded by a green aura. The snow around us was intact but we remained shielded from its effects. We felt no cold, and walked through the snow as normal . I looked back to see if it had melted the snow and ice but it had in fact not, it merely created a sort of gap where the place where we stood had only grass and temperate climate. After we passed the area, it reverted back. We entered the cave.

The cave was still somewhat cold from the wind and snow that howled into the mouth, but the entrance was kept clear somehow. I later realized it was heat from the other end that prevented snow from sticking. The cavern had loads and loads of side-tunnels, but some of them had boulders that we couldn't push because they seemed to be blocked from the other side. I sometimes wonder if God places boulders in caves and dungeons just so people will have some kind of puzzle challenge. Nahhh...

To our right was a small alcove. As we turned the corner in this cave, much of the cold air and stuff wasn't there, but then it returned as we entered the tiny room. Maybe it was too close to the outside walls? The room was pretty well decorated for something so small, and was filled with chairs, bookshelves, blankets, the space broken every now and

then with an ice pillar or something. No, those perfectly sharp ice crystals you see in movies don't happen, but there are such a thing as ice stalagmites. It still seems impossible to me, but droplets freeze and collect until there are seemingly impossible collections of ice rising straight up like the reverse of icicles.

Anyway,I sat and relaxed (more or less, though we did need to avoid ice cold water dripping on our heads) read a book about what she called Black Ice spell, a dark/ice composite spell that shot razor-sharp icicles at its targets. "Lemme read this," I begged, suddenly curious about how spells worked. Azrael asked me, "Are you sure? Because ummm you can't use magic and..." I nodded, and grabbed the book she handed, opening it to the first page or so. As far as I knew, I couldn't learn conventional spells, but seeing as I had seen runes before, written on stuff, I didn't see how it could... and I tumbled to the ground, dizzy and nauseous. I threw up, and realized I couldn't remember a single word I read. "Ahem," said Azrael, "as I was going to say, those running magical academies used to be burdened with too many students to effectively house and teach, as most people can use runes to some extent. They wanted to filter out people with irregular or broken *dantian* that they couldn't teach conventional magic, and set them on some other path. There were also people with rune-sucking abilities, so to protect the school's secrets they had to come up with some way to sort people out. Look, here, on the inside of the cover, there is a series of active runes, that triggers when you look at the opened book." I looked at where he was pointing, only to become dizzy again and I forgot what I'd been looking at. I dry-heaved a bit. Sorry everyone.

I left the room, using the shoulders of Nevras and Elias to hold me up. As we headed further into the winding cavern, the temperature gradually rose. At least, I think it did. Michael seemed comfy no matter if it was warm or cold, and my Four Gods Crest kept me at a fairly moderate temperature. Despite my barrier, it went from feeling like a cool day to about summer. As we entered the next room, I understood why. The cave had been slowly leading us to a volcanic area underground. Apparently this cave had formed when magma spilled out and hardened into rock, but the stuff inside was still flowing. I imagine if we hadn't been resistant to the heat, it would feel less like a summer day and more like an oven. Convection was nothing to joke around with.

Pools of lava flowed nearby. Plants that had tried to grow in the area near here were turning black, and all but bursting into flame. In the center of the room, a large dragon slept in the lava. It was an onyx dragon. "Why do you disturb my slumber?" it mumbled sleepily, revealing emerald green eyes.

I said, "You can talk? Yay, this will make things easier! Hey Mister Dragon, we need to ride on your back." The dragon rolled its neck over and yawned, "Wait until my nap is done, and we'll discuss that." And the dragon returned to sleep.

"Hey Elias," I asked, "how long do dragons sleep, on average?" He thought about it for a second, "Well, it depends upon the dragon. Your average green dragon sleeps for a millennium, whereas yellow dragons sleep for maybe 8 hours. But then, greens tend to be lazy." I motioned him to continue, "Which one is this?" Elias sighed, "This isn't a dragon species. Like Tiamat, she's a unique dragon. This is Bahamut. She's friendly for the most part, but yeah you'll die long before she wakes up from this nap." I grabbed into our backpacks and pulled out our cooking gear, and started banging loudly on it, shouting, "**Hey!!! Stupid dragon! Wake up already!**" This got her attention.

THE WORLD

The great dragon arose from its slumber. While there are many elemental types and colors of dragon, it is widely believed that there are but three basic shapes of dragon: upright, serpent, and quadruped. That is, there is the European variety of dragon, the Wyvern, and the Long dragon, which was more like a serpent with no wings and one or two pairs of legs. This is not totally true. There are also Beast dragons which looked more like mammals than true dragons, Amphitere which are kinda birdlike and have wings but no legs (Quezacoatl is a prime example), and Aquatic dragons which have more the shape of something akin to Loch Ness Monster than anything else. Tiamat and Bahamut were unique dragons, Tiamat because of his multiple heads, Bahamut because of her unique body shape. You see, wyverns couldn't typically get on all fours because their body was

stiffly upright, and the European dragon was typically so front-heavy that it couldn't sit upright. Bahamut however, had a flexible body, almost like a bear. If a bear had a long reptilian neck, scales, sinewy body, and a decent sized tail.

The group therefore was greatly shocked to see the creature move from a lazy prone position to the full vertical height of the cave. She said, “Foolish ones. You dare to challenge me for the Dragon Whistle? Prepare yourself!” The concept of Dragon Whistle was lost on most of this group. As mentioned elsewhere, a dragon soul is a ball of energy that can be used as that dragon wishes. A slain dragon can completely control what happens to them after death. Rarely, if adventurers managed to defeat a dragon and persuade it to be a mount, the dragon might split its soul into two, a weakened dragon and the Dragon Whistle, capable of calling it from virtually anywhere in the same dimension.

The battle began in earnest, for the dragon was greatly pissed off at having its nap interrupted by rude folk who wouldn't just go away and wait for her rest. Bahamut breathed a prismatic burst of gas at the group. It missed, but the area it hit turned from solid rock into dust. She whipped her tail, and three of these nuisances slammed hard against the wall hard enough to die instantly. Another one was eaten alive, and the rest were burned to cinders from her breath.

Reality reset itself as if from the hand of some deity, and the group once again stood before Bahamut. Bahamut, unlike many creatures in the world, was intelligent enough to remember when such events happened. “Not again,” she sighed, as she blew her stone breath. The chemicals in the mist calcified any organic material, as has been known to happen near volcanic areas with high silica content, but to all observers, it was easier just to say that it was magic. In any case, those people would never bother her again...

Until they did. Reality reset again, and Bahamut groaned. This was the last time. After this, she was just going to do what they say, it it would get her some peace and quiet. This time, the group appeared to be using a strategy. “Alright,” said the one in green clothing, who she would later know as Zoe, “I will go first, so everyone buff me. And don't worry, I'll be fine.” Bahamut wondered where her confidence came from.

ZOE

I have not lived a bunch of reincarnations for nothing, you know. If it really comes down to it, I'm basically immortal. Though typically, I die with the others, because the process sucks. I can swap out previous incarnation instead of dying myself, using that as a shield against harm. Bahamut slashed with her immense claws, expecting a young girl with pigtails, but instead killed off an old man. From behind that body, I charged forward with my scythe. “What is she doing...?” Ambrosia asked. Azrael, apparently aware of my condition, explained, “Zoe's previous reincarnations all serve as protections for her real body. She has about 108 of those previous lives. Well, 107 now... Okay, 106,” she amended after one got eaten, leaving my current body standing in their general place. Bahamut blasted some of them to dust with her breath, petrified others, crushed the skulls of a few, and dispensed some more with her tail. “What happened if all of them die?” Ambrosia asked her. Azrael shrugged, “It depends. The Hindus and Buddhists believe when you reach the end of your rebirths, nirvana or moksha happens, and you just get freed from mortal life. Taoists see life and death are part of the same whole; as such it's more of a cycle, with the goal being immortality. I honestly do not know if she'll die for good or what will happen.” I was about to find out. Bahamut inhaled deeply.

All dragons have two breath weapons, they have a spit attack that is just a quick burst of whatever, and they have their full breath attack which continues until the dragon runs out of breath. The larger the dragon, the bigger their lung capacity, and the more devastating their attack. And this dragon was huge. “Stand behind me everyone,” I told them. And then I watched as I lost all of my extra lives. It was just me against the dragon. The others tried to support me with defensive spells, healing my wounds, and Nevras used his techniques to support me. Nevras couldn't get close enough to use the Dragon Roar, and its reflective scales screened out quite a bit of offensives spells. Azrael could only affect the dragon indirectly, using stuff like earthquakes to pin Bahamut with cave-ins overhead. She roared, and screamed, “Why won't you die?!?” then blasted me with the last of her breath.

BEYOND THE WORLD

The soul known as Zoe stood before God. Souls are immortal, so no matter how many times she died, this couldn't be the end of her. Without a distinct body, Zoe was no longer male or female, simply a ball of light. No matter how much she might want it, her body was blasted to dust. Revival of that was beyond their priest. “This was your last life,” God said, “you will not be able to defend them anymore.” We watched them on display from this space. Nevras was using some of his techniques, but his Void attacks seemed to not be doing the whole erasure thing, for some reason, and he couldn't find a ton of opportunities to use the Dragon Roar because of this thing's speed. Ambrosia had little means of attack because her knife lacked reach, and this dragon had long arms, long neck, and long tail. Aqorm usually was helpful against stuff like werewolves, vampires, some robots, and other things when her geomancy worked. But since the dragon was basically living in a hot room and apparently immune to the heat, probably not. Michael used his Script to help, but most of the tools he made burned away from the heat. Elias was healing, but everyone seemed to be hurt faster than he could manage. And Azrael was attacking, but having trouble damaging the dragon. “They'll die,” the soul asked, “won't they?” God showed her several possible futures, using an ancient tool of prophecy that resembled a small black ball. Some had Nevras try to use Dragon Roar and being petrified before he could finish, others had Bahamut slaying party members in various ways, still others had Ambrosia trying to take the dragon on using Michael's Crest only to die long before she got close enough to use it. And whenever Ambrosia died, her Four Gods Crest wore off, instantly incinerating the rest of the party through the convection of all this lava. “Signs point to yes,” God muttered.

“Why are you showing me this?” said an outraged Zoe. “I know who you really are. I should go back there, and help them! My Sage form...” God refused, “You have no body. How would you return?”

AZRAEL

I could only do so much with my spells. Runes have an issue with top-tier dragons, because they are runes, and as such can only make manifestations, not reality. Let me explain. The average caster can use runes in one of two ways: they can either cast it on something that already exists, or they can invoke power directly. Let's say water. I can find a water source, and use runes to redirect the current, throwing water at the target. That's what I did with trying to cause a cave-in earlier, but the rocks weren't heavy enough to more than pin Bahamut, and eventually, she rolled them off her body. If I blasted something directly with water I made, though, the water was made from runes. You couldn't drink it, it could maybe drown something, but I wasn't sure about whether that was the case, and if it was, it was because the runes said this is how water behaves. Things made from runes were no good against this dragon's runeproof scales. If I was somehow able to make my spells solid, things would be different.

And Nevras was having trouble because of where we were. Void was tremendously effective at sucking away solid matter. But in areas of extreme heat or cold, it tended to suck away energy and heat long before it got to matter.

We weren't doing so well, and Michael wasn't even helping. What was wrong with him? We were dying and he just stood there, as if waiting for an invitation. Zoe had even died. Even Aqorm gave a better attempt than him, and she didn't even have the right sort of weapon to more than pinprick it.

My mind kept going back to that spell I read about. It was the ideal spell against a largely fire-type dragon, and it would be sharp enough to poke through the dragon's skin. But the book operated on a theory that I had never applied, for it was written at a time when wonder-workers used a mix of runes and Original Intent to create solid magic.

My first attempt wound up being a typical spell. I mixed the dark and ice, forming eight icicles and launching them at Bahamut, but the effect did nothing at all to the dragon as it hit its scales. I tried again, thinking on the theory presented in the book. Perhaps the reason it hadn't worked for me was that I saw it as a spell? I thought of being in a cold and dark place, trying to envision the concept as real as possible. My experiences as an exorcist had plenty of encounters with darkness, so I just focused on

recalling my time near the town of Kirin. The more memories and feelings I put into the experience, the more solid it became to me. I felt like I could now make my spells solid! I said the words, "*Black Ice*." It felt different, almost like I was lifting these icicles. There were only three of them made instead of eight, and it felt like they were tossed in slow motion, but this time, the attack connected. Bahamut screamed in agony. I used the same solid spell technique, calling out, "*Acid Splash*." The dragon was covered in yellow-green liquid and her scales were burning from the reaction. She thrust her arm towards me. I had seen what those arms could do. It was all over.

And then suddenly, it wasn't. The arms never connected with my body, another form interposed between us. And then I saw a scythe. "Zoe..." I said, tears in my eyes. Then logic took over, "Wait, your body was completely destroyed, I saw it happen!" She smiled, "Look around the room, will you?" So I did, only I didn't know what I was looking for, "There's nothing here..." Ambrosia grinned even more, "Where are all the reincarnations that she turned to stone? Or maimed? Or burned to dust? God gave me a new body, made out of 108 other bodies. Only, this one's in balance with my soul. This one cannot die, nor be destroyed. And I can rejuvenate myself." As if to demonstrate, Bahamut blew a full breath attack at her. The attack that had burned through all of her incarnations did burn her clothes away, but there was no blasting to dust this time. She just fell over. "Zoe!" I screamed, concerned for my love. Then something weird happened, as we watched, some sort of energy enveloped her body. I felt like I was watching that awful film with Christopher Lambert and Sean Connery. "I'm fine," she said, getting back up. She was more than fine, looking at her missing clothing from the intense heat. I blushed. She bound the loose garments around her, making a loin cloth around her lower sections, and binding around her breasts with the remaining burnt rags. She'd need some new clothing later, but we probably had some spare in the ship.

Then she taunted the dragon, "Is that really your best? Lemme show you how it's done." Zoe proceed to land blow after blow on the dragon with her scythe. She wasn't all that strong, but she also was now divine. Nevras used the distraction to try his Dragon Roar, and Bahamut was finished. Michael said, "I knew you could do it. I know, it seemed like I was doing nothing, but I was waiting to see if you two could develop your true powers. Plus, dragons are cute. I couldn't act until I was sure. Wouldn't want you two to depend on me, after all." I hate him.

Bahamut choked and sputtered, "***cough* *cough* *wheeze*** I see. So you are those chosen to bear the Crests. I shall aid you by giving you myself as a mount." A few seconds passed, and if I didn't know what she was doing, I wouldn't be able to explain it to you. Making the Dragon Whistle was such an extremely strange process, that the eyes cannot adequately process what they see with regards to it. One moment, there was a dying dragon of massive size, the next, there was a large orb of energy, the moment after that, that orb split into two orbs, one about the size of a penny and the other just smaller than the cave. The orbs turned back into matter, and the dragon seemed to have shrunk about 10 ft while a whistle made from some strange substance appeared in the air. I caught it before it slipped into the lava. Our group docked the ship back at Phoenix island, since it didn't seem to be very accessible here, then we blew the Dragon Whistle.

Immediately, Bahamut flew overhead. We carefully climbed her back, and directed her towards where we wanted to go by verbal command. Bahamut was a sharp dragon, and she didn't need immediate directions, we just told her, "Go to Hell," and she did.

Flight while carrying burdens generates drag, so while dragons were technically capable of traveling speeds in excess of 350 mph, the drag from carrying a group of people coupled with the fact that Bahamut knew she had to pace herself since she was carrying most of us (Michael just flew there by himself), meant not only was she being slowed down by what physics still worked in the New Earth, but by her own caution. As it was, Bahamut could make it there in hours if she had some way of harnessing us in, but instead it took nearly as long as by boat. Those roleplaying games you humans had, where the endgame flying machine solves all problems of travel is just not realistic.

Regardless, sooner or later, we did make it to Hell. The high bluffs that prevented all entrance by sea were no longer a barrier. Bahamut just flew over those jagged rocky mountains that those bluffs eventually transitioned into. On the other side of the

mountain, Hell didn't look so bad... until we approached the center. The rich volcanic soil filled with flowers and grass started turning dry, and then rockier and more covered with molten sections, until at last we were there. In this place, only one plant grew with any prevalence, besides of course dark onions which could grow even in the Realm of Void. This was the red spider lily (*Lycoris radiata*), a plant also called naked lady, or among those who knew of it the plant was called the Hell Flower or resurrection lily, so named because it grew most frequently here, and was said to guide the dead to their next incarnation. It was bright red and extremely beautiful, but it was a plant often associated with burial and all parts were poison. It absorbed negative emotions like anger, fear, loneliness, and bitterness, tending to grow in proximity to such places. And yet, its eight upper stems resembled the spokes of a wheel, making it a favorite of Buddhism.

Original Intent was usually secondary in prevalence to runes, except for general shape of things, but when it wasn't, as in Heaven, it changed the rules of life. For instance, in Heaven all conditions were set up to remove death in the conventional sense, and many types of human suffering. Here, it was anywhere from 400°℃ to close to 2000°℃ yet even without any shelter we still survived. Remember, a sparkler is usually not dangerous, but the actual temperature is 1800°F at the low end (roughly 1900°℃). It's not temperature, but how it is dispersed. That is, the more mass something has, the more heat it gives off. But this is not to say this was a weak or harmless effect. It was fully hot enough to set things on fire. And yet, the rules of reality were altered that these flames had no lasting effect on the body. Though we indeed were put under an ordeal, not one hair on my head was harmed. It was actually more like an uncomfortably hot summer day.

They could neither kill nor would they cause any permanent scarring once the person removed themselves from the area. The greater issue was the tremendous pain everyone faced within this area. And it wasn't just physical agony. While in this area, a person felt as stressed as one holding a full-time high-pressure job, which didn't pay well but one was trapped in for two years because they had a poor record. Relationships became strained, most of us became depressed or grumpy, and all of us felt like it was painful just to move around. Why, I almost got in a fight with Zoe, even though just awhile ago, I had been all but ready to give her a hug. Now, we were in Hell, and as much as we were all suffering together, I wanted to beat up everyone. I can't imagine how the others were feeling. If Heaven could be considered like a marriage to God, Hell was very much a nasty divorce, complete with all the alimony payments. You just couldn’t get along.

The town of Hell was just nearby, and off to the distance was an active volcano and a half-ruined church. Seeing as how the church had growing grass around it and looked much cooler than right here, we went there instead, despite Hell being closer. We'd come back, but right now, none of us could handle this.

CHAPTER 25

In which Ambrosia meets her real mother. Also, it's shorts weather, apparently.

AMBROSIA

It was a bit of a walk to get to the church. And considering where we were, it was basically like walking on hot coals for two or three miles without shoes. All of us took off the winter garments from Bahamut's island, and shoved them in the bag, but it didn't stop there. We wound up stripping down to just underwear. And yeah, I know, my environmental protection should have worked. But here, pain was kinda omnipresent.

You can find out some intimate things about your friends by looking at what they wear as, you know, their intimates. Michael didn't have to strip at all (lucky bastard), so he was still in his angelic toga. I glared at him, but Michael always seemed either too naive (or too arrogant?) to really be affected by what other people thought about him. Aqorm apparently was okay being sky-clad under her clothes, and it didn't seem to bother her. Elves, I guess. Zoe had bound her breasts slightly in bandages and wore a loin cloth below, since her original clothing had all burned up. Azrael wore a sort of leotard with a complex print (it looked like a big critter holding a circular container with six chambers, the moon to the left of him, and a monk to his right pointing to the moon). “It's the wheel

of Samsara," Azrael explained, noticing Zoe staring at it. I averted my eyes, as the whole design drew more attention than I wanted to pay to the area around her crotch, and like Aqorm she was not wearing a bra. Elias was wearing temple garments, yeah, like the Mormons. Nevras was in nothing but white boxers with hearts, although I would have liked to see his cute body in some bra and panties. I was wearing the most functional and comfortable lingerie I could find, no frills of any kind. I had a gray sports bra and matching brief panties. They were very plain, but I liked them.

"Hey, Michael! Can you give us something to wear that won't make us sweat so we're somewhat decent?" I said, glaring at Aqorm and her nice body and her round perky breasts that managed to stay up without any support. "What? I'm comfortable! It's your own fault you're such a prude," she said shortly before I punched her, demanded she take that back, and started rolling around on the ground with her. We were wrestling, honest. Michael seeing this display, shook his head. "I'm not giving you clothing until you actually need it." Now, everyone but Aqorm (who didn't seem to care what everyone thought) became utterly shocked. "Huh? Why not?" I asked him. Michael sighed, "You humans and your knowledge of good and evil. When you were on the island, you were in legitimate danger of death. Nothing about this environment can kill you, it can only cause you pain. Are you gonna die of embarrassment? Probably not. More importantly, if everyone can resolve their differences when in the worst place imaginable, they will get closer to each other in general. But since everyone's so jealous of me being fully dressed, fine, I'll take it all off too. ***Banish Garment - Target: Self.***" Then he removed his personal barrier. Down came the golden aura, and then off came his clothes as they converted into light or whatever. I stared. Michael made Nevras look ugly in comparison, he had a beautiful androgynous body with very soft curves. Nevras caught me looking, and I blushed, ashamed as I was lusting after this angel like a horny schoolgirl.

Meanwhile, the whole time, Michael continued to walk past us without any sense of shame or modesty. Nevras and I talked our feelings out, though. Much like you'd expect about conversations in this place. I accused him of attraction to Azrael, from that one time she fell in his lap. He talked about how I wanted to leave him for any cuter guy who came along. We had a few months of random jealousy, and we hadn't said anything about it then, so now it was all boiling up now. It wasn't his fault though, I knew that. It was this damned place, I couldn't keep my mouth shut and my impulse to hurt people under control. This place conspired to take our worst flaws and use them against each other.

Somehow or other, we got to the temple. It was an old Christian temple from the looks of it, with pretty simple architecture. It had an old rugged cross on top, a triangular roof with pillars underneath, and a frame of solid marble, but the years had not been kind to this place. Statues of saints and angels stood covered with moss or broken, as did much of the building. A hunched over old lady swept the grounds. I stared at the building for a long while, until suddenly I gasped as I recalled my past as a vivid flashback.

I saw my mom, with her brick red hair. Manna Leaven, God had called her. Her hair wrapped in bandanna, her clothes mainly earth tones, and she was diligently repairing a temple that only tourists might ever visit, since the demons weren't interested, and tourism was down on account of the lovely climate here. I saw my mom trying to run the temple entirely herself, until one day, she just put her hands to her face in despair. She groaned, "I've been running this church for years, but people stopped coming centuries ago... Why do I do this? Am I destined to die alone?" As if to answer her question, a light descended, and the form of God appeared. Oh good, maybe God answered her prayer and set her up with whoever was my real dad. I would probably remember who he was this time, so I had to watch closely.

And God said, *Fear not. You shall not be alone, but shall have a family. I shall give unto you the family name Brahman. And I shall give you a child in nine months time.*

What.

Manna gave her consent, but not exactly as Mary the Virgin did, meekly saying "I am the Lord's servant, may it happen to me according to your word." I knew where I got my abrupt way of speaking now, for she said instead, "Come into me. **Now**."

I seriously was squeamish about watching my parents have sex, and I wasn't sure how it was that I had a flashback from before my birth anyway, but I couldn't stop watching for some reason. Probably the same reason everyone watches porn.

Needless to say, having sex with God is ummm different, as different I suppose as some sort of tentacle hentai. I'm not gonna talk about tentacle hentai though. Not today, nope. There was nothing rough about this sex, God was a gentleman, but it does bear some explaining. God had no hands, no feet, and no obvious sex organs that I could see, so I at first wondered how this even worked. But then I saw God split into three distinct triangles and change his size, and I got a better impression. Each triangle functioned as if a large finger/mouth/other organ combination, and was able to fly to wherever she wished he'd touch or kiss, reading her mind and following her lead. The first triangle flew inside her mouth, allowing her to suck on it, and massaging her tongue before flying outside to kiss her, and then giving her triangular hickeys along her neck and ears, before kissing and massaging all the way from her back down to her feet. The second triangle had peeled off her clothing, then moved around her breasts and stomach, making her feel similarly good in front. The third one was apparently a giant perv, for it hung around her clit and massaged it. She started making moaning sounds, "Ahhh! This feels so..." At that moment, all three of these touched her in just the right area, for she climaxed, becoming very wet down below. The triangles stopped what they were doing and flew inside her vagina, penetrating her rather gently in the process. Somehow or other, I assume by all three joining inside her body, and what needed to be done had been done

I was struck by how gentle all of this seemed. It was like a woman using her fingers on another woman rather than a man plunging it deep inside hard and fast. I suspect if she had been a virgin, she would not even have bled. She cried out, "...**good**!" just as God finished his work. God exited her body. Manna seemed to have a glow about her skin, and God likewise also glowed more than usual. I was officially traumatized.

God told her, *You shall have pleasure far greater than this. During your pregnancy, you shall feel not pain, as has been the curse of ages past. Instead, you will feel ineffable, indescribable pleasure with every kick. And although I have the universe to run, I promise on Sacred Oath to visit you every Sabbath.* She nodded, face still glowing with joy and ummm pleasure.

Nine months passed, and I was born. "I will name her Ambrosia," she said, after bearing me. About three or so years passed, and I was starting to walk around. True to God's word, Manna was visited by God at least every week. While initially God only appeared as a triangle, once Manna got to know God, the deity's guard was let down and apparently Manna got to see God's human form. This form, however with shrouded in darkness, and I could see nothing but silhouette. Apparently she could see God though, because she seemed surprised by something about God's features.

I was starting to do other stuff too, I had some sort of strange abilities not at all like my Oracle abilities. They were more like some sort of psychic ability. I was apparently able to create light, heal people, and fire big blasts of energy. You know, just harmless tricks. My dad appeared as a floating triangle, and Manna greeted him, "You're back! I've waited all week!" For someone who had no face that I could read, God looked down in the dumps. *I apologize*, he said. Manna looked confused, "What for?" God answered, *I must break my promise, and take Ambrosia from you.*

Confusion turned to outrage, "**What**?!? Why?" *Ambrosia is beginning to develop childhood memories, and identify with her parents*, God said, *this is a dangerous time, since she could abuse her powers and hurt those she cares about. It is better for her to grow up away from this temple, and without the knowledge of her true parents. At least, until she grows up and develops self-control and kindness.* So much for the second one. I wasn't thrilled to be seeing all this weird sex, but this was how I got here. Manna said, "..." After the audible pause, she said, "I understand. But I want to take her to a family who I trust." He said, *As you wish. I love you... Manna*. I got the distinct feeling of a blush, even though Father had no face. "I love you too," she laughed, "don't be so embarrassed!" She had another concern, "But..." He asked, *Yes?* She continued, "Will I ever be able to see Ambrosia again?"

I looked back at my journey with a growing sense of realization. God could have done this whole thing himself, but he didn't. Talking to God, I realized one huge reason was resolving problem this way is boring, but I also understood his other reason now. He comforted her, *I will send her on a quest to save the world. There is a chance you'll meet.* She thanked him, as the flashback faded out. I started crying.

"What's wrong?" asked Nevras. An hour or two earlier I was fighting him over my stupid jealousy, and now I was hugging him for support. "I remember," I said, "I remember everything. This is the church my mom used to run. You know, Manna Leaven. Manna Brahman, I mean." I heard a voice from the side of the temple, "I thought I heard something..." She looked at me, "Ambrosia? Is that you?!? ...It is you! I'd recognize you anywhere. I see so much of your Father, looking at you..." I'd never seen Dad's eyes or face so I couldn't even get a good mental image. "My lands, child! I haven't seen you in ages!" she exclaimed. I asked her, "Do you still see Dad every week like he promised?" She raised an eyebrow, "How do you know about that promise?" I told her, "You had God erase my memories, didn't you? When I saw this place, I think I must have broken the binding on my memory. Everything came flooding back, even the memories you two had." Manna nodded, "I see. Well, perhaps one day, you'll be able to talk to God. In person, I mean. He's *really* different without his symbolic form. Come visit more often! Your last time was years ago!" She hugged me, and I introduced all the friends I'd met along the way. She told me, "I'm getting old, Ambrosia. Remember to visit me regularly. I will surely join God when I die, but I still don't relish having nobody there to witness my death." After that, we had to leave, for there were no beds to spare.

Walking back to Hell was a chore. Michael agreed it was okay to have clothing now, and gave all of us black to wear. The entire place was such that traveling even a few miles was oppressive. I suddenly wanted to strip down, only this time, I wasn't likely to be picky about what I wore. But Michael said to leave these black clothes on.

I saw my mother in Heaven the next time I visited. But never again on this Earth. She died not long after, and I made the inscription for her grave when I visited again. It showed the words, «Here lies the mortal body of Manna Brahman. Buried by her daughter, beloved of her husband, forever.» After what seemed miles of torture, we made it to Hell.

If we thought the town might be a haven from the misery of life outside, we were sadly mistaken. It was more temperate than the area around it, but.... the town of Hell was everything a city should not be. Those who wanted to work were kept indoors by law, while those who hated work were forced to work. And if people made some money, it was redistributed with others, leaving them with little or nothing to show for their efforts. Even those who got charity didn't get to enjoy it, because of taxes.

Since Hell was not part of the Council system, they felt completely okay taxing people's earnings. Aggressively, in fact. No sooner did someone make some money selling from a shop than the tax demon came up to their store and tried to shake them down. I watched as this happened all day. People had to pay per hour to park their horses, mounts, or vehicles. Property taxes were so high that in the hour since we walked in, we saw about four different people getting evicted from their houses. You weren't allowed to sleep in the streets, that was true of any town. But because of property tax, nobody even really owned land so they could be tossed out at any time. If you didn't have money for the inn, you were basically forced out of town where the temperature was much worse. Oh yeah, and zoning laws were such that you couldn't build anything outside of town on the entire island. Mom's church had only managed by being grandfathered in.

Taxes weren't the only thing though. There was widespread hunger and thirst, and it stemmed from the fact that Hell's currency was on a different system than Gold. With Gold, you worked hard, and mostly got to keep your earnings, because they represented your sovereignty through labor. With Record of Value, you were basically writing a check and nobody cared, because the more generous you were, the more it helped others. But this system ran under a currency known as Lucre.

Lucre was a currency that was a coin forged as fiat money from dried blood, sweat, and tears of humans and other demons, shaped together through unknown means. There

were Lucre credit cards, and the interest rate was (of course) usury. It was also issued only by banks, and only minted as a result of debt, meaning it basically had to be paid back with interest as soon as it was given out. All of the money was basically spent around to conceal the original debt-owing parties. And rumor had it, they were working on making their money even *more* sadistic.

The one thing they *didn't* have was any RFID (Runic Frequence Interaction with DNA) systems or microchips in their cards that possibly made the hand glow. I had heard earlier the State tried this outside Hell, but it was finally struck down under the Council. The demon telling me about this explained that their economy before the Lucre was the Mark of the Beast. It started out with the Phantom Virus, where nobody was allowed inside without masks or gloves; after everyone kept trying to outdo each other, eventually everyone was dressed like Shy Guy. The idea of enforcing masks and gloves became a joke, so they tried something different. A marker inserted into the neck or hand of people acted as constant surveillance. However, it proved to be a terrible idea, because demons started cutting each other up so they could access more money. After the population of Hell started to dramatically fall to the point of near extinction of the demon race, demons decided the amount of death exceeded the amount of suffering, and it was so much more fun to torture others than kill them. The demon telling me all this said, "**Thank you for listening to my story. Most of your kind hate us for some reason or another. Here, take this. It's 10 Lucre. Consider it a loan**." A loan? Why not just give it to us? It's not like we could pay this back, like ever. The only jobs we knew of that demons saw as valuable were usually either outright criminal or... oh no, we're not doing that.

Okay, just a quickie. After paying the demon back and saving the other 50 Lucre, we explored the rest of the town. It sucked. And I had lived in Opening for quite awhile. The river nearby was flowing with salty water so we had to buy water in order to not feel gnawing thirst for our entire visit. Oh yeah, and while you couldn't die, you could still sweat, pee, feel hungry and all the rest, so we were in constant agony.

The few plants that managed to survive in here were not much good either. There was the mandrake, which was technically used in potions against petrifaction, but it had to be pulled by deaf people since it had a tendency to scream of such a frequency that those hearing it would simply keel over and die. Then there was the Zaqqum tree which as everyone knows used to be a planting of the Tree of Life, but it was so horribly mangled after Knowledge of Good and Evil that the fruit was spiky like a mutant durian. This fruit pricked you, more often than not draining your blood, and if you managed to eat the fruit inside, not only did it taste horrible, but while it did in fact give you immortality, it trapped you here. You were chained to this place and couldn't leave. Heaven was a place where you were in bliss and with loved ones, but here, you were unable to properly love anyone, since you were in too much pain.

Oh yeah, and a variety of crow with deep red eyes and a jagged beak tended to fly nearby and bite anyone who did manage to keep a positive attitude. Being pecked by birds is always a sign of bad fortune. In the New Earth, nobody got bitten by bugs or mosquitoes, so the idea of an actual bird messing with someone was a curse.

Aside from a river of salt in one area, and another of blood (in order to stay hydrated we used alchemy to filter it into an empty "water" jug), dry rotten land, and rickety wooden bridges everywhere, there were three houses of interest. The first was what looked like a church, that had a holy symbol of some sort burned on the brick, but it turned out to be a pub, a place for another sort of spirits. The second was an item shop that sold weapons of fire or darkness, and seemed to be really good quality stuff. Figures though, we finally have a place with awesome weapons, and we can't afford anything. As it was, we couldn't afford even to rest at the inn, since that was 50 Lucre, and we had spent 10 on an empty bottle of booze. We'd heard there was an Oracle in town so we asked around. "**Oh yeah, I think her name was Lilith**," said a tall demon woman with blue skin and green hair. "**You should ask Satan**," said a demon man with glowing red eyes and six arms, "**he knows a lot about what goes on in this town**." A third demon, with razor sharp teeth said, "**HUMANS, HUH? COME CLOSER...**" As he licked his lips and we backed away, we decided to maybe take the other guy's advice. Searching around again, we found out that he was at the pub, and we could probably find him sitting on a throne.

After entering the pub and finding a lizard man, two couples, and bartender, we passed by those and looked for a man on a throne. We instead saw this flat-chested woman who looked kinda like an elegant gothic lolita singer. She had straight blond hair with bangs in front, but her hair in the side and back curled into ringlets. This plus her pale skin reminded me of some old doll, and I was tempted to think someone placed one to sit on the throne while Satan was away until I saw the "doll" blink and then stare in my direction. She wore very dark eye-shadow, blue lipstick, and a frilly blue dress with a matching bonnet. Her eyes were a deep enough shade of red that I understood that she was not in fact human.

Or in fact female. Like many people I had met on this strange quest, this person appeared to be feminine until he spoke. Not that there aren't plenty of crossdressers or transgender folk who have a feminine voice, but this is from training. This one had the breathy sexy voice of a singer. He knew my weakness though... I love sexy androgynous types. This must be Satan. There was one way to find out, I had to flatter him until he either confirmed or denied it. I exclaimed, "What tremendous demonic energy! This must be the Hell's ruler!" To my surprise, he shook his head, "***Bah! Not a chance. I run things here, sure, but ultimately my orders come from God***." Okay, so Satan wasn't the true ruler of Hell? And what was this about God being in charge here? Father wouldn't cause evil! Would he? While I was thinking about this, Satan asked me point-blank, "***You know what I do here, right?***" I shook my head, "You tempt people, right?" Satan sighed, "***Another human with false understanding... I used to accuse humans. People claimed that I had tempted them, but they just didn't want to take responsibility. Evil is the result of free will, and all humans do evil. God allowed me to accuse people of their own failings, in order that they'd work on them and grow. But, with religions like Taoism, folks already knew that they had evil. So now all I do is remind them when they fail. Under the supervision of God, of course.***"

I asked, "So why do bad things still happen?" Satan scoffed, "***Imbalance. True evil is imbalance, child. Imbalance in nature, in politics, or even in the self. When people understand their flaws, all becomes right with the world. When things stagnate, they decline. Long life where everything is safe is not actually living, because nothing is growing."*** I thought of Zoe's sudden sacrifice leading to her own eternal body, all her different incarnations, and how much this had been a development into something new rather than a preserving of stagnant things. I remembered my question, "Oh, right. I wanted to find Lilith, the Oracle."

He explained that Lilith was a bit of an oddity in town. Most demons had angel counterparts, and acted like proper demons. But Lilith was was different. She was unable to connect to other demons, and she had no angelic counterpart. Although she lived in Hell, she had somehow bought a house with no property taxes, and locked herself inside. The key was said to be delivered to the nearby volcano where none could bother her without risking their lives. Yay, I always wanted to visit an active volcano!

CHAPTER 26

In which all Hell break loose. No, not really, I just wanted to say that.

LILITH

Today was the same as yesterday. And the day before. And nearly every day since I was born in this lonely life. Demons don't really have families. They don't have a sense of fun, not in the same way that you humans understand it, anyway. The closest definition of fun involves vandalism, rape, and murder on human settlements. They don't do anything like cooking, board games, or books. They don't have room for love, they don't do much actually that I'd find enjoyable. So when I became an adult, I locked myself away in my room, built a mail slot, and ordered everything from Gargarean.com, the online retailer. I read books, I watched movies, but other than that, I nothing much different from one day to the next. I did have to eat, but unlike the demons, I had my own source of income, and a home that couldn't be taken by the other demons, even Satan. And yet, I was quite lonely. I had nobody in the demon race that I connected to, and never would.

I'd better back up my story a bit. I was born after the death of Jesus. More specifically, as a *direct result* of the death of Jesus. You see, angels and demons are typically only created, not born. Typically, angels stopped being born since the ban on mating for all the Seraphim. Demons exist as that angel's shadow, to interfere with their counterparts. But we couldn't really fight each other directly without passing damage to our counterparts. It's like the Mystics and the Skeksis in *Dark Crystal*, whatever happened to us happened to the angel counterparts. Then, there were the archangels in heaven, those who had names. Then there were the Seraphim which had no counterparts because they were a unified whole. And finally there were the Fallen, which were basically corrupted Seraphim during the war in Heaven. And then there was me.

I was born, as I say, at the death of Jesus. You've heard of the Harrowing of Hell, right? What, you haven't?!? Long ago, Jesus died for the sins of humans. Dwarves, elves, and the like were also under the auspices of this death, but because of a lot of stuff I won't really get into, it affected them in different ways. When he died, two major things happened. First, the curtain of the Temple was torn. This meant that people no longer had a barrier separating them from God. But it would be awhile before people realized the implications of this. But more importantly, the Afterlife was fundamentally changed. Under the Law, you had a sort of standard that was difficult or impossible to live up to, so pretty much everyone who died fell short and the Afterlife generally sucked. But the Harrowing of Hell meant that the gates separating the place were thrown open. So, people were released from being trapped in a bad Afterlife. But there was a third thing that happened. Jesus forgave us, the demons. We demons were now able to have children, unlike those angels, by using our tails. But those children had free will and souls. They had normal feelings rather than wanting to rape and kill. I was the first child born to a demonic pairing since that time. And once they saw how I was, they were determined that it be the last. The Demonic Method, the system of laws that Satan governed humans and demons with, ruled it a crime worthy of extinction to bear demon children with souls. And by extinction, I mean extinction of one's bloodline. They'd kill until none of that household remained. And yet, I was a Blessed demon. I had no angelic counterpart, and I was immune to the laws of Hell. I was able to hold a job from home and immune from property taxes. They wanted to evict me, but they found they couldn't, nor could they destroy my house. So they left me alone provided I stayed away from other demons, something I was only too happy to do.

I guess that brings things up to speed, aside from talking about the thousands of years living in Hell when it was still hidden in Earth, living through Belial's binding, and into the New Earth. Besides angels, we demons were the only ones that witnessed this. Not that I saw much from my window. I did however see humans, an elf, and an angel of all things enter the town and look around for awhile before coming to my house. They checked to make sure that the door was in fact locked. They must have asked Satan. Nobody trusted that guy. It didn't help much that he looked like one of the performers of Malice Mizer but for his red eyes. Nobody trusts goth musicians.

After becoming satisfied with there actually being no open entrance (though I was sorely tempted to invite them inside, since it had been nearly seven millennia since I had had contact with any living thing), they headed toward the volcano. This was a very rough road ahead for them. I had hid my key under a rock in the volcano, then guarded it with fire elementals that I bought the loyalty of ages ago with some nice firewood. The high temperature of the volcano was such that water magic wouldn't even cast. They'd have to collect water in some kind of specially-made bottle good enough to stand up to the temperature, and then dump it on them, but collecting the water was one quest, and somehow getting Lucre for such a bottle was another. They would never...

I recall thinking this, but sure enough, a couple hours passed, and they unlocked my door. Who were these people?!? I had just enough time to try to shoo them off, but they didn't seem to pay attention.

AMBROSIA

My brain was baked by too much heat exposure, so inside this girl Lilith's house was suddenly like a cool breeze. In fact, this was a cold house. I didn't understand how, but it

was like the loneliness and isolation of this girl formed a buffer against what was outside. I felt for her, without her saying anything. Then she opened her mouth, and I wanted to hug her. Her voice sounded so sad.

The girl was dressed in a little black dress and a black cape, more for sex appeal than anything else. Horns extended from her skull, much like a goat when they first filled in, short and straight nubs without too much of a point. Her hair was a dark purple to the point of nearly black, darker even than Evil Ambrosia's, and her skin was strangely tan despite zero exposure to sunlight. Her cape hid what I would later see were a set of bat wings large enough for her to probably do limited flight, or more likely gliding, since her body seemed pretty muscular and heavy. Every now and then, a cute little tail moved out from her dress and cape, it had a point like a blunt spear, but as I later learned, it could becomes harder or softer and even sorta changes shape.

Her voice sounded normal, not all possessed like the other ones. She asked us, “What are you doing here? I thought I made it clear that I didn't want to be disturbed when I hid my keys.” The expression on her face told another story, though. “I... we're here because I'm the Oracle of Tao, and I've come to awaken my powers and stuff. I guess?”

I looked around her house. The decor was weird. It was an all stone building, including the roof, all the better to not have one's house burned down, I guess. Most noticeable was a giant pet rock in the center of the room. She had a Crystal Mirror for viewing shows, and from the looks of her collection of crystals, had an entire set of the *Deltora Quest* anime in Japanese, along with Osamu Tezuka's *Buddha* series. I found this funny, as the entire mess in both stories started because a king never went outside. She had a large ice crystal in her room, which was probably another good reason her house was so cold. She had barrels of supplies, two beds joined together, statues of grotesque demons, and some stained glass windows along with her regular windows for viewing outside. The stained glass showed the most sacred scenes of an otter eating a watermelon and being grumpy about it, and the other one was of a man's hands on a keyboard looking at something familiar on the computer screen. There seemed to be a faint image of a blue-haired girl and a blond guy on that screen. A third stained glass was of course a nude. There was an elf girl standing there touching herself, and Aqorm blushed. Oh yeah, and she had a five-star kitchen, a large bookshelf, and a chamber organ.

“Hmmm,” she said, stepping behind her organ, playing as she listened more to our story. She played “The Oracle's Calling,” a moody indecisive piece that started out with a repetitive beat before adding in a lot more heavy organ stuff. It was composed without any real understanding of musical theory, apparently. “That does sound like some journey that you went on. I wanna see your power, okay? If you can impress me, I'd like to join you. But only if you leave that angel over there behind. He's too intense-looking, he scares me.” Lilith wasn't quick like Michael was. She had about size 15 heels, which she took off along with her leggings to move faster in that dress. Her hands and feet didn't have regular nails on top of them, but a small slit where the nails should be and completely smooth skin there. She had retractable nails, after all. Her feet were used for hanging on surfaces. She trudged along at a pretty steady speed, wisely deciding to retract her toe claws for better running.

We were all set to fight as a team against her, since Michael had been hard enough, when she stopped all of us. “Hold it, hold it, you guys,” she said, “I can't face all of you in battle! I'd get creamed! What you think I'm a superhero or something? I'm just a demon girl, I've never trained in any kind of martial arts. And besides, come on, I'm shy, go away everyone! One at a time! I want to face each of you in single combat. Except him! I've heard of that guy. Michael fought most of the Fallen here! He'll kill me.” We agreed, only to realize we had been tricked.

No, Lilith hadn't lied, she was about as skilled at fighting as an average shut-in. The difference is that while a human *hikikomori* tended to pack on pounds (it was much worse for the original Earth), much like angels and elves, demons stayed healthy and sexy. She had terrible skill, basically being like a brawler, but her body was built tough, like a tank or something. She didn't have a force field around her like Michael, but then she didn't need one. Her skin was tough enough to stop most bullets. And in she had several natural weapons to work with (horns although hers were pretty useless, four sets of claws, a tail,

her teeth, and her wings, even before we got into demonic powers), so she really didn't need to know how to fight well.

Just as Michael and Lilith were social opposites, they also had completely different style of fighting. Michael had use of Script, and was fast enough to fight against mobs. Lilith, meanwhile, managed to overpower each of us in one-on-one combat until she finally got beat. Since Michael had nothing much to do, he started using his personal barrier, spreading a golden glow on the bookcase, books, walls, ceiling, floor, ice crystals, mirror, data crystals for the mirror, barrels, beds, stained glass… "I'm not touching those demon statues. Hey ummm, fiend, what's up with the rock." Fiend was an insulting slur against demons. I didn't really understand the insult though, but she looked more hurt than mad at him. "Don't call me that!" she said, tears in her eyes. Most people didn't start crying when someone had insulted them. It looked like she'd had a lot of grief from the other demons. She probably was left out of a lot of demonic activities, too. "I'm not a fiend, I'm not..." Michael started again, "Ummm, Lilith, was it? Do you want me to protect that big hulking boulder in the middle of the room?" She snapped at him a bit, "No, I don't want you slapping any of your creepy angel magic on my stuff! This yellow glow hurts my eyes and I'm actually standing on glowing stuff too! You leave Christina alone!" Michael looked puzzled, "Who is Christina...? You named your pet rock that?" Lilith glared at him, "Quit talking about her like she's just an object! She's my friend, which is more than I can say for you lot! What are you thinking, covering my room with bright auras?" Michael responded, "First of all, I didn't want your room smashed up with us in it. Second, I don't like your attitude, you should be thankful!" And she retorted, "Thankful? Hah! Why should I be thankful to a fluffy white like you? And for the record, you take that off the floors, walls, and ceilings, those held out against demons for seven millennia, and it makes everything too bright!" This went on for awhile more, disrupting the battle we were supposed to have. It was like watching an old married couple fighting.

We all drew straws to decide fighting order. It looked like Nevras would fight last, then me, then Aqorm, Azrael, Elias, and Zoe was going first. Zoe went first. "Guys, I got this, I beat that dragon Bahamut earlier." Hearing her say that, I totally believed it. Until I saw her overconfidence, and remembered the way the last fight went down. She'd lost 108 times, and could have died forever. Her eternal body was just indestructible, it wasn't any stronger! She swung her scythe, but she was off-rhythm, and Lilith caught the blade samurai style. You see that in a lot of movies, but it isn't so, you're more likely to get your hand sliced up than stop the blade. But Lilith had a much sturdier body than us humans, so yeah, she was able to do that kinda thing. She didn't have much skill, so she didn't really disarm her so much as just push the scythe back, and she knocked Zoe back with it. Seeing as how her scythe wasn't likely to do much, Zoe tried her Fire spells. There's something you should know about demons, that I only learned after this battle. Demons are not only physically invulnerable but their skin disrupts most magic at least as well as dragon skin. About the only thing they were rumored to weak to was holy power, and in particular, they were said to absorb fire into their skin, becoming stronger. I don't know it that's true, but she did basically walk through a wall of fire without flinching. For that matter, not even her dress was burned. Zoe put up her guard, freaked out at this girl who was way stronger than her. Lilith was right, the ceilings and stuff didn't need to be reinforced. Zoe slammed her head into it pretty hard thanks to an uppercut from Lilith, and there no dent or anything. Ditto for the walls, Elias didn't get a chance to gather holy runes, as Lilith rushed him, slashing at his arms, and whacking him with her tail hard enough to send him flying.

"You **bitch**!" screamed Aqorm, as she broke order, and went ahead of Azrael. Those of us who could heal spent their time getting Elias back to stable condition. Zoe had already recovered, with just a bit of stiffness in her neck. Aqorm rushed ahead, and was in fact faster than Lilith. She got a few swipes in, and the elven knives did react strongly against demonic skin, though she didn't manage to hit any vital spots before Lilith countered. She flapped her wings hard, going aloft for a few seconds, then clapped her wings hard around Aqorm's body. Her ribs cracked, and she went down. "Seriously?!?" Zoe cried, "we just got done healing up Elias."

Azrael was next, and seeing how badly the others got brutalized, she cast Fast

Healing. She also used a Protection spell to prevent anything from being too fatal. She swung her sword once, only to have Lilith block it. Azrael swung lower the second time, this time grazing her dress. Unlike the spells of Zoe, the sword Raphael had fire as part of the fiber of its being. So when it hit her dress, unlike Zoe's basic spells, which left her dress untouched, it caught fire. She kept trying to put it out, but it was ruined, so she unzipped it and tossed it aside. She fought the rest of the battle in her chainmail bikini. Azrael couldn't use her effect spells on the demon, so she tried her new solid magic on Lilith. But even though Azrael cast Black Ice, sending shards of ice at her to impale her skin, there was a reason there was such an expression “like a demon” to describe extreme ruggedness. I mean, seriously, she had punctures right through her, and she just ripped them out and started moving right towards Azrael as if nothing had happened. Thankfully, all the defensive stuff she'd cast meant that while she got beat up, she wasn't needing too much nursing.

And then it was my turn. Remembering what God had said about my weapon, and fearing to seriously hurt Lilith, I put my First Iron dagger away. I also wasn't sure about most of my Oracle effects. My powers tended to be slower than the others, and far more powerful, and since Lilith seemed to shrug off a lot of magic, and I wasn't really sure how my Oracle powers differed, so it might do too much to her or nothing at all, and I had no way of knowing in advance. And so, I whipped out my fishing pole, which I had been told I could turn into anything I could imagine. For some reason, the most practical thing that came to mind when fighting a demon was to turn my tool into a golden-banded cudgel. The weapon was long and flexible, and made out of some weird red metal. I put one hand over another, until the staff rotated in a circle clockwise. I whipped it sideways, whacking Lilith across her chest. The places it hit seemed to burn her body almost like attacking with elven weapons. I continued attacking, blocking with one end her claws, and hitting her belly. The rod caused her skin to sizzle, and blacken a bit, although contrary to the stories, demons are pretty good at healing even wounds to stuff that hurts them. She tried to grab my staff but seemed to find it really hard to hold or something. Regaining the weapon, I basically whacked her a bunch of times, hitting her back, her knees, and her head a few times. Finally she was knocked on the floor. I turned around, talking to Nevras, “Hey look, I did it Nevras! I won against her! Aren't I great?” Nevras seemed impressed for a second, then looked behind me, “Hey ummm, she's getting up...”

LILITH

How dare he! How dare that angel call me a fiend! A sweet and innocent demon like me is not, by any means a fiend. That title is for those who kill loads and loads of humans and eat their mystic power, those who possess humans and take over their bodies from within, or those that make *those* bargains with humans. I've not done any of that!

He had no idea the pain and suffering I'd felt all these years. How could he say that to me?!? I wanted to beat him up so badly, but I settled for all of those other people. I did have fun arguing with this guy though. And, to be honest, his angel body was kind of hot.

As the others fought me, I was looking for people other than the angel which I could talk to later. After all, it wasn't right that angels and demons mix, that seemed forbidden or something. The swordsman seemed extremely taken. Nah. I also ruled out the blue-haired girl. The Druid and the exorcist seemed in a committed relationship, given how the latter tried to hide the fact that she was visibly upset that the Druid got hurt. In my experience, the grand displays, like that elf did after I smashed up the scholar, are not always what they seem. I had been around demons all my life, I knew when someone didn't seem like they were here for the right reasons. This elf girl, Aqorm, intrigued me.

I had heard an old religious story about this concept. It was called the Atman. Long ago, there was one Soul. This Soul was all alone in the world. Let's see it as a big crystal, where each piece is part of the whole, but also a shard of the crystal. This Soul broke into smaller souls, so that it would not feel alone, but each part is the same as the whole. Humans use such analogies to explain religion, or why humans should be closer and more peaceful or something. I'm using it to explain why Aqorm should be in a polygamous relationship with me. ...What? I'm a demon. To my way of thinking, this Elias and I are two parts of the same soul, the one who wants to be with her. One of us is

only interested in a friendship, a spiritual connection with her, and the other one (me) wants her body. Obviously, she can only be with both of us to have someone who loves all of her. That way, I don't have to be with this angel Michael, who makes my heart flutter so. I was thinking this as I smashed up most of their group. Some of them tried to hurt me, but I usually made them hurt worse. Including that last one.

NEVRAS

I watched Ambrosia declare an early victory, only to be blindsided while she was patting herself on the back. On average, demons are much slower than either elves or angels, they cannot maneuver well and aren't good runners. However, there's some things people misunderstand about demons.

People expect demons to be a certain way. Like angels, with the whole winged humans thing, the average person is surprised to find out otherwise. Nevermind, most of these are symbols. For example, the horns to remind people of an aggressive animal like a bull, the cloven hooves to remind of an unclean thing, and the teeth and claws to draw parallels to a predator cat. The tail on the other hand, is quite another symbol. Like how its eyes and fire-breathing are meant to call images of some fiery underworld, the tail is another symbol, that of oppressive government like the State. The tail looks like a splice of two weapons: the spear and the whip, both of which were used to punish others. Because these images are so powerful, people have trouble seeing demons any other way.

But demons are actually greatly varied. They do all have tails, but this is not only their main defensive weapon but also their... ummm sexual organ. Also, while there are male and female demons, the more human-looking sex organs they have don't really work the same way. They're mostly for pleasure. Female demons are also far more common than male ones, whereas angels were only male. Most demons also have fangs and claws, but their look can vary. Some demons look more like lions, some look almost human, and still others are a weird hybrid of furry mammal and human. Not all of them have wings or horns. Many of them are able to withdraw or retract their tails, horns, and claws although their teeth and eyes usually reveal them as being at least some sort of evil critter. Their feet can curl as much as their hands (though not fully opposable) allowing them to gain traction and walk on hands or feet.

Next, there's the whole “All demons speak in creepy voices” thing. The reasons they have altered voices in the first place is when they start to absorb spirits into their voice. This usually happens if they try to possess people's bodies or suck out their energy. That's why, if a demon has a creepy voice, it's better to move away.

Prime among these misunderstandings, however, is that people see them trudge about with huge shoes and decide they are easy to avoid. You see, as I explained earlier, a demon has more versatile hands and feet than humans. If they ever get on all fours, they can charge, and it is fast enough that a person won't see it coming. That's kinda what happened with Ambrosia. She saw Lilith prone on the ground, and then she saw her on all fours, believing she was getting up, and then Lilith pounced at full speed. After some healing, she regained consciousness. “Ow! What train hit me?” she asked, before losing consciousness. Lilith responded with a smile, “I did!”

It was my turn. She would pay for doing that. Maybe Michael wasn't fighting. Maybe the others weren't good enough, but I could stop her. Drawing my sword, I blocked her claws, as they came for me. She stabbed me a bit with her tail. I stabbed her in the knee with my sword, and she screamed in pain, blood coming from her leg only to rapidly burn, closing the wound as much as possible.

ELIAS

Demons are not built like angels, despite being the same essential species. As you know, elves are essentially similar to humans with all the same internal organs, with the exception of a faster metabolism, more efficient immune system, and an extra region in their brain allowing them to read Fey. Dwarves are basically identical to humans, though their compressed body allows their system to be slightly more rugged, and their bones and muscles are bigger in proportion, making a race that is on average much stronger. Let's not talk about goblins, gnomes, trolls, and many of the others, we'd be here all day explaining specialized organs. Aside from wings, an angel that looks human generally has

human internal anatomy (again, we're not talking about the floating eye or giant wheel angels, because such information usually isn't found in the books I read).

Angels have one heart, they have a brain, kidneys, spleen, you get the idea. However, they have features to them that have no equivalent in humans. And they are missing other organs. Angels have no Adam's apple, but rather a modified unisex larynx. They also have an incomplete hypothalamus, as they do not develop sexually. But what is more pronounced is not what they lack, but what is added. Angels, in addition to a physical system of internal organs, have a fully developed spiritual organ system. This is why attempts to use X-rays on angels to look at their insides would usually blind the device, and usually can't perform surgery anyway, because angels heal very quickly.

An angel has five spiritual organs, each of which is marked by a symbol. These are like chakras, except all angels have at least the bottom three active, and most have four. The *corona* at the center of the their forehead, this allows angels to activate or deactivate their halo, although not all angels have a developed halo. When an angel has managed to unblock this part of themselves, they can see through illusions, see events far away, and even predict the future. On the neck is the *bhasana,* the spiritual organ responsible for Script. It also allows them to speak any language. In the center of their chest is the *shinzo*, which forms a barrier around themselves that they can allow or restrict anything from entering. They can suppress this, allowing them to be hurt, but restrained by antimagic. And they could share their protection with others without the use of Script. On the center of their belly was the *ionad*, which centered all healing processes to form a sort of secondary protective layer. That is, as long as they were conscious, and even some while they slept, their body would constantly heal their wounds and cleanse most toxins. Angels did however have pretty poor immunity to alcohol and mood-altering drugs, but they could usually clean up quickly. At the bottom was *beten*, just above where their legs met. On all angels, this allowed them to expose or hide their wings, and even change sex.

Demons had a corrupted version of each of these organs. They can retract many of their demonic features, they have a firm body and fast healing rather than a barrier, their voices would alter the more they did evil and they had breath weapons, and lastly those who were powerful demons tended to have huge horns. Good and evil are simply twisted mirrors of each other, after all. But there was a key difference. Demons shouldn't be alive. Angels had living organs, while demons had internal organs largely just for show. On the operating table, demons don't have a beating heart in their chest. They don't bleed. They can't get brain-damaged from getting punched in the skull. They don't breathe either. So, what was this demon doing bleeding just now?

LILITH

As a next-generation demon, I was the first in a new batch of fell creatures. I could bleed, my heart could beat, and I could experience Grace, and thus have my sins forgiven. My voice didn't show any sign of taint, but even what sins I had committed could be forgiven. And so, while my blood burned outside my body, I nonetheless bled.

But... this human shouldn't be able to make me bleed my own blood. That weird exorcist girl almost managed it, but that was because she was using some sort of ancient magic. Who were these people? They were hardcore!

The rest of the battle was a blur. I tossed a darkness ball or two at him, but somehow he swiped it with his sword and it disappeared. That wasn't supposed to happen either! I tried to pounce at this guy, but he'd seen it before so he dodged aside. He slashed me with a flurry of blows. I think I was done.

“Whoa! Totally awesome, dude!” He stared at me, so I tried again, “I mean, ummm... I see you are a warrior of great merit. I'm impressed!” Ambrosia said, “Please, teach me the truth of your Crest.” I shook my head. “I won't. Or rather, I *can't*. I'm sure you understand.” She looked confused, “No, I don't follow.” I explained, “Have you ever tried to tell a child NOT to do something? They do it. Especially our demon children, but that's beside the point.” The one called Elias nodded, “The Way that can be named is not the True Way. Although we learned much from previous Oracles, actually doing it in practice is another thing entirely. I understand.” Where'd they get this guy? He's sharp! “How about this,” I said, “I accompany you, and maybe you can teach me something about

being an Oracle. That will earn your Crest. Is it a deal?" She nodded.

Somehow or other, this line of thought granted her the power of my Crest. I saw myself teaching her my own Crest at some point in the future. Then I saw her palms glowing, as we were about to walk outside my house. She tested out the Snake Creeping Through Grass stance, throwing balls of darkness and fire along the floor of my house. We stepped outside. The daylight was blinding.

CHAPTER 27

In which all kinds of political stuff happens, which generally sucks.

THE WORLD

And it came to pass in those days that the world went totally fucked up. Following the fall of the Council, in addition to wars mentioned before, the alchemists gave way to scientists. Technology was reinvented, such as giant mechs, plasma cannons, and unsavory sources of energy that spewed blackened smoke everywhere. Large machines with gears and coal-burning engines clogged the air everywhere they went, and mad science reigned supreme. And with it came all the lures and flaws of technology.

In the wake of science, came pseudoscience such as sociology and environmentalism. People formed bureaus to catalog people into races and types supposedly to equalize everyone, by singling out people to give special privileges. At the end of it all came the concentration camps. And those concerned with global warming now turned to super-science to create clouds to blot out the sun, while those seeing the climate as a cooling trend tried to get underwater volcanoes to erupt. The air became filled with sulfuric and nitric fumes, society collapsed, and that was only the beginning.

Towns began to unify into cities and cities into states, government gradually became bigger, until finally the State began to return. Income taxes went from about 0% to closer to 80% overnight. In response to the crippling debt of the common people, such governments proposed a global currency system using credit cards, from the check card model. Only, the governments decided simple cards were difficult to keep track of, so they proposed the RFID system. They advertised it as also being successful keeping track of lost pets. Surely, this couldn't be used to keep tabs on regular people as though they were criminals. Open borders were also imposed in the name of freedom to visit other countries, sending floods of illegal aliens from other lands and dimensions to do as they wished with the countries of the New Earth. In effect, the Council was like the Fisher King, while they did well, the world moved towards a brighter future. Now that they were gone, governments continued to misrule, and the world was suffering their excesses.

Of course, some governments refused part or all of this agenda. Phoenix refused to adopt the global currency, or Aquamundo ignored the environmental "science" in favor of natural magic and alchemy and using traditional methods. But almost overnight, many towns became different to the point where the average person away from the area wouldn't recognize things. Why, Gruumi became a crowded metropolis!

The only good news was that as they continued, they would ultimately fall apart from their own excesses. The Mandate of Heaven dictated that as leaders became more corrupt, their rule became harder and more expensive to manage. This is true even in an economy that prints its own money. Failing a revolt from the people themselves, natural disasters will happen, invasions from outside, bandits take over, and eventually the old dynasty falls and the new dynasty takes over. And the new dynasty would treat the people well, until it too became the old dynasty. This cycle would continue forever, without the intervention of a power like the Council preventing *any* centralized system, or people actually *learning* from history. But the latter was probably too much to expect.

While all these wonderful things were happening on the rest of the New Earth, in Heaven, there were other problems, mainly that of a revolt. Unlike the revolt of Satan, this was no demonic uprising. It was simply one angel not happy with the general negative trend of the world. "The Council fell. The world is back to petty wars for control of nations," Estheriel said. God shrugged, *I KNOW, MY SERVANT.* Estheriel was less than pleased with this response, "You **know**?!? Why won't you do anything?"

God explained, *Free will must be allowed to occur. I must not act.* Estheriel scowled, "Free will?" Estheriel fumed, "**Free will**?!? Why do you continue to allow such a thing to exist in this world? It causes more harm than good to the humans who have it."

God had been there from the beginning, and been alone for much of it. God knew that a homogeneous mindset was boring. Estheriel on the other hand, had witnessed eons of suffering as humans competed and fought with each other. He wasn't against free will, the angel simply disliked its side-effects. *Balance must be kept. A world without willing servants, is a puppet world*, God explained. And God told the history of Drudges.

Estheriel had enough. "**I defy you!!!**" he screamed, "I leave to form a pure world, without evil." The angel, ever the idealist, had no desire to create suffering of any kind. He simply did not understand why Earth could not be more like Heaven. God nodded, if it was possible for someone like God to nod, that is. *Very well*, he said, *if you do defy me, I will send a servant. One who is not male, nor fully female, but one born of fire.* It would not be known until much later that this prophecy referred not only to Tamashii, a tomboy with powerful abilities of fire, but also to the one known as Ash who became female as a result of lightning setting him on fire. But that's a story for another day.

Estheriel looked shocked. "How can such a thing exist on this world?" she asked. God said, *You shall see, and you shall believe*. God doesn't banish people. Not from Eden, not from Heaven. They decide they are no longer welcome, and thus they are.

AMBROSIA

I'm worried about what happens after my journey... I remember the Aiken master's words, "This is all very well and good, but what happens next? After you get all the Crests and stop the great evil demon who returned, then what happens? You grow old and die, with nothing to show for it." I brushed that question off at the time, but now I'm a tad bit concerned. I know other people believe in the Afterlife, but I don't actually know what happens after you die. I know the physical stuff, the body dies and gets recycled into the ground. But what happens to my soul? I know about Heaven and Hell, but they were actual places. What actually will happen to me? I have visions that everything will just fade away, and I won't exist anymore. I cried out, "I wish I knew what will happen to me after I die!" At once, there was a rush of wind, and I heard a voice speak to me. *Fear not*, a still small voice from God said to me, *I have a plan for you.* I asked, "Really? What is it?" His voice continued, *There is little I can tell you. Still, I can tell you that your feelings and the way you live your life greatly affect things. The Afterlife is not just how you treat others, but how you feel about yourself. Your heart will guide you.* Nevras grasped my hand, "Let's build our Afterlife together. Wherever it is, I don't care. I'll be with you when you die. I promise."

We walked together to our ride, Bahamut, the dragon lady. Lilith hauled around that huge rock she called Christina, much to Bahamut's annoyance. We charted a course for Aiken Monastery, but with the weight of all of us, plus the addition of Lilith, plus a giant freaking boulder, Bahamut had to stop and take a breather. We landed on the forest just outside Galaxia, and had to walk the rest of the way. And no, I don't mean *in* the forest, Bahamut is rather big, and seeing all those nice leafy greens, she just plopped herself down and began eating everything that was vegetable matter. Dragons don't need to be meat eaters, since all that protein just weighs them down. She needed fiber and carbohydrates to run her massive system, so she started munching on trees. Bahamut told us that she would eventually be able to carry extra weight, but her was just not used to a sudden increase of weight like that. "I'll need to rest and recuperate for at least a week," she said, "then I'll be able to carry more."

The angry displaced animals of the forest tried to charge us, but Lilith quickly showed us what Christina could do. She held the big stone one-handed, knocking animals prone. We wound up with a lot of deer meat, boar meat, and even some wolf meat. Lilith watched me salt some of it for later, while Azrael and Elias used their runes to preserve it. Then I cooked up a meal using wild greens and onions as she watched. "I wish I knew how to cook like you," she said, "I mean, so little of demon impulses are acceptable around other people. But here, you're cutting apart animals with a big butcher knife, and nobody so much as blinks." I smiled at her, "Okay, then. Now, let's start with chopping

vegetables..." I had her do that, then got her to chop meat, and while I seasoned, I had her stir the pan. Her strength was really too much, as she almost chopped through the cutting board at a few points, so we worked on getting her to control her strength first. After awhile though, she seemed to have at least novice potential.

I was gonna get her a butcher knife in town, but as it turned out, all the shops had some kind of special requirement now to buy anything. It didn't matter if we were renting a boat (many of which were shut down from some sort of licensing requirement) or trying to get a room at the inn. It seemed like we were stuck, so we went around and talked to a bunch of townsfolk. Some young girl dressed in rags told us that the Council fell, and the governments started experimenting with a new money system. "You'll need to go to Phoenix," she said, "they refused to change from Gold. If you can get there, your problems ought to be solved. If not... well, you're screwed."

NEVRAS

Weird. That little girl looked like a younger version of Ambrosia. She even talked in the same way. It didn't seem to be Jesus, though. Resisting the urge to stare at her, I instead worked on drafting a letter. I needed to get word to my parents to pick me up.

Perhaps you readers don't know how a *real* post office works. You thought you gave mail to the carrier, and they sorted it by zipcode and sent it into zones, and delivered it to your door by that way. I'm not sure how that method didn't take a week to get anything delivered. No, the way mail works now is that you have a letter or package marked with either a stamp or a rune. The stamp has a rune on it, so if you don't know how to write runes, you could pay the post office 10 Copper to add a stamp to the mail. We couldn't use money right now, so I had to do the other one. The runes didn't need to be active since tossing them in the mailbox would do that, which was a relief for me since I was educated at the palace in how to write a few common runes, but I had virtually no mystic power. Inside the mailbox, a ley line energized the runes, and the rune said, «*Teleport*» allowing the thing to instantly reach its destination with a 5% chance of burning to cinders instead. This was another reason people bought stamps, these were protection against that chance.

But supposing you didn't have either stamps or the ability to write runes? Every day, the mailbox was opened, and mail crow delivered it. It may surprise people to know that carrier pigeons are simply birds taken from their homes and they fly back to start. But these birds were different. Awhile back, people discovered that crows were more intelligent than the average bird, so they bred them to be able to learn more and more. Because Lamarck happened to be right, these crows eventually became clever enough to read Common and navigate to post offices in specific towns. The humans in those towns working at the post office would filter it out and deliver in person. Since I wasn't keen on my letter exploding, and Phoenix Castle had its own mail center, I just addressed it to Phoenix Castle, and I wrote my letter, « Dear Mother and Father» I said, «I am currently in the state of Galaxia but I regret to inform you that the economic system has now changed. I will require assistance with extraction from this location and I appreciate your help at this time.» I tossed the mail in, and watched the bird take off. To be on the safe side against storms or interception, I also made a rune-marked duplicate letter, writing in parentheses that this letter was a duplicate in case the mail was lost.

I actually enjoyed going to the post office nowadays. Yeah, I know, you readers think immediately of insufferable bureaucrats when thinking about the postal service, second only to that of the Department of Motor Vehicles. No, today the post office is a model of customer service. It all started when one person had a local business, and they wanted to place their business card where they were sure everyone would see it. Nobody had heard of direct mail marketing. But the post office did have bulletin board for events. So they stuck a few business cards up. Other people who were also small business owners also did so, now and then, but inevitably such cards no matter that they were small and inconspicuous were always taken down. Sometime after that, the post office put up signs saying that putting up such signs was against federal regulations and/or illegal. Then things got worse, as frustrated business owners probably tore down those signs. More regulations came up, these ones strictly forbidding vandalism of signage by postal

workers, and finally a sign on the front door was posted threatening legal action if customers displayed aggressive or irate behavior. In other words, not only was the customer forbidden from acting out, but they could no longer air their grievances without being accused of being “irate.” This of course was unconstitutional, as one of the customers finally pointed out, after watching the amount of posters on this bulletin gradually diminish to only community events and those for-profit posters that happened to be okay with the post office (because like those who set up laws everywhere, they were damned hypocrites). In the middle of the night, the customer put up a sign on the outside of the door, covering to with about four layers of tape to stick it, and insulate from wind and rain. Then they nailed it, *95 Thesis* style, to the glass door. The next morning, the door was seriously cracked, but it made enough of an impact that a few people read the note, which complained that: “(1) The post office is appointed by the United Stated Constitution, the same document that gave the Bill of Rights; (2) the Bill of Rights granted freedom of speech, the right to assemble peacefully, and the right to petition grievances to the government, as well as the 10th Amendment guaranteeing rights to the people that were not secured by the government; (3) as they have torn down signs and denied the right even to complain about it, they are in violation of most or all of these rights and behaving in an unjust and unconstitutional manner; (4) that those who simply wanted to advertise were being treated like criminals as a result of their actions; and (5) that although private businesses had the right to act independently of the will of others under certain circumstances as in *Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colorado*, the same was not true of businesses paid by the taxes of people.” This of course got legal action from the post office, as they said the person had behaved in an aggressive and irate manner (not to mention completely smashing up their door), so this matter got taken to court. The case was lost, and the apparent vandal was put to death if I remember correctly by being tied from head to toe with Priority Mail tape; however, a class action lawsuit listing a other grievances such as late or lost mail allowed this issue to somehow make it to Supreme Court. The Supreme Court upheld the complaint, and a number of reforms were ordered to the system. As a result, postal workers now have a business board for support of small businesses (so long as they are a regulation size of not more than 3.5" by 5"), as well as the events board, a news board of local current information, and a miscellaneous board which tends to get covered with cooking recipes, songs, and random meme pictures. They have become a meeting place for all kinds of people to assemble and chat. Another change is that since that event, all postal workers wore a badge on their chest. The logo had an African swallow delivering a coconut in its beak and bore the Latin words «*Tabellarius Caenum Sunt* » meaning basically “postal workers are scum.” This was not so much to humiliate them as to remind them of their deeply bureaucratic past, and to not turn their back on the public. The logo was a vague reference to Monty Python, to remind them that postal workers need a sense of humor.

Within an hour, I got a return note marked with the royal stamp and the wax insignia of the king's crest. It was addressed by my dad, but when I opened it, it was Mom writing. As was the case with much of my kingdom, my dad took credit for being the ruler of Phoenix for the sake of face, but my mom was the real ruler. At least they got the money right. «Nevras, you know we love you and we will help you out of this problem. The Council is a wreck and we are fighting a war, so we cannot send our royal ship. We will instead send a low priority vessel for hauling turnips so as to not arouse suspicion. You must disguise yourselves in any way possible and present the following tickets. They should be there tomorrow. Please be careful, my beloved son. -Vicky» it read.

Setting up tent outside, we changed our clothing. Ambrosia put her rags back on. Thanks to Zoe, we had loads of old grubby clothing. I changed up my hair by tying it in a ponytail, and put on a maid dress. Michael changed his sex to female, and made herself look less radiant and more like a drab girl in tattered gray dress. Elias refused to wear a dress, so he donned work clothes. Aqorm and Zoe didn't have particularly nice or distinctive clothes, so they stayed the same. Azrael just found a traveler's hood and put it over her exorcist outfit. And Lilith found a nice dress and an umbrella, then she acted like she was our supervisor. The ride to Phoenix wasn't very pleasant because Lilith decided to put us to work the entire time waxing the floor, painting the deck, and scrubbing the

furnace. Some of this stuff, I knew did not actually need to be done, but discipline was key if I ever did want to be a governor of a country. I still had to act the part to not arouse suspicion, so I swept and dusted everything as a proper maid should. Meanwhile, Lilith sipped tea and sat in the sun, shifting position only to bark out orders. For lunch, we had turnip juice. For dinner, turnip stew, and just before we came to port the next day, turnip sandwiches. It turns out that too many antioxidants are not all that great for the body and I do not need to spell out the effects of high dietary fiber, not to mention our intestinal tract was screaming for other food by that point. We rejoined with our own boat from there, thanking my parents, and sailed towards Ghobli. After some walking, we came to Aiken Monastery.

AMBROSIA

Oh, not this place again. The door was unlocked, but then there was the screening process by Gwendolyn, the resident Seer and Truthteller. The half-elf woman in a long flowing gown interviewed us, the last line of defense after the giant wall, aerial defenses, and the orichalcum muting all magic used against it. She had the final say on who entered and who was not allowed, since she could not only detect who was untrustworthy but she knew the possible futures.

“Ah, I recognize that voice,” she said to us, even though I hadn't said anything yet and before I knocked on the gate. I knocked on the door and called out, “Hey Gwendolyn! We're back!” Gwen responded, “Ambrosia, how are you doing? Oh, it looks like you have more guests! Hmmmm... Nevras, do be careful not to break her heart! It would change everything.” Nevras looked embarrassed, and shrugged as if to say that he had no idea what she meant. I had no idea either, since our relationship seemed to be going well. We hadn't had a good conversation in awhile, but this was because we had been busy traveling and fighting. I'd have to do something about that. Oh my, was he going to cheat on me later?!? I must have made a weird face because Nevras shook his head frantically. I knew it, he's guilty about something. Gwen continued to see into the future, “Zoe, is that you? I've missed you so much! It looks like you've got a little girlfriend too, good for you!” The two of them went red as beets, as the girl foresaw more, “And you two! Are you sure there's nothing between you? Angels and demons can be together, you know. Oh, but there's a complication... I see. Hmmm, but this won't do! This won't do at all!” She continued to confuse all of us, so finally I just asked, “What won't do?” She explained, “This demon must **not** be allowed to enter! For I see that she will wreck things in the Aiken Monastery. All of you are welcome, but she must be left outside.” As we stepped inside one at a time, Lilith became more and more enraged, until finally she spit Hellfire, burning down the door.

LILITH

What? I was pissed off. Besides my claws, tail, and my pet rock Christina, I have a few ways of attack. Aside from Fallen, which have demonic powers in addition to major Script abilities, most demons don't have what would be called magic. We can't use runes, we just sorta summon fire or darkness in our hands, and some other tricks that I can't do like possess people. What I can do is stare at someone and turn them into stone, charm people, and of course, use Hellfire.

Hellfire is sorta the inversion of Script. While Script was a powerful force of creation, Hellfire was a power of destruction. They were roughly equivalent in power to Void, but while Void was a power of antimatter, Hellfire was a sort of mixture of flame and darkness, able to bypass resistance or even immunity to either. Hellfire was how demons destroyed each other, and while there were certain items that could screen out Void, it was said only intervention from a deity could protect from Hellfire. The flames were far hotter than Druidfire (yet just as controlled), reaching temperatures of just past the Planck Temperature, that is, the hottest things can get without... weird things happening. At the temperature that Hellfire raged, conventional physics just doesn’t work. Density, electromagnetism, and nuclear forces kinda merge together into a unified whole. The flames weren't gonna try to turn the Earth into a sun or anything (although they could if aimed directly at the Earth's core by a powerful enough demon). This meant that in addition to burning people, animals, and objects to nothing but stardust, the flames also

warped matter, broke down regeneration, runes, and even melted materials that were supposed to be indestructible. Basically the only thing that could stand up to Hellfire were things made by God: souls, Conception, and First Material (no, bodies were not made by God, although the original model of human bodies was; they formed around souls using the dust of the Earth). Hellfire could also be used indirectly, spread out to the point of not completely burning and decaying things but rather used as an effective tool to breaking down curses and such.

I'll be honest. I didn't really hold back. I melted that door down to a singularity, blinding everyone looking directly at it for awhile. We needed to take a break anyway.

AMBROSIA

After being blinded by intense light, loads of healers helped get us back to normal. "As I was saying," Gwendolyn explained, "And here we have an example of self-fulfilling prophecy. Think about all of those predictions I made. These may happen, but they will happen if you act a certain way in response to what I mentioned." Wow, Gwen sucks.

After a few days in treatment, we made our way up the tower. We passed by the Druids and people training in the courtyards, and walked all the way towards the top floor. Well, that's not accurate. You see, Gwen decided to sound the alarm, "Nephilim invaders in the Aiken Monastery!" So while our main party walked up there without problems, Michael and Lilith had to fight their way through the entire tower. "Why did you do this?" I asked Gwen as she followed us to the top. I suddenly understood why the last time we went up here she managed to make it before us. She was in peak shape despite being virtually blind and had memorized the layout of the place from her prophecies. We were gasping to keep up with her, and she passed us and made it to the top steps. "Oh that?" Gwen answered, "those two need to be tested. Aiken doesn't have the same concept of sin as Jews and Christians. We care about worthiness. All of us have worth, but to be worthy requires belief in oneself. They must be tested." Jerk.

LILITH

Hard to believe that just a week or so ago, I only had more time indoors to look forward to, if I didn't want to be bullied by the worst sort of demons. Now I was getting to explore the world! I just imagined I'd do so without being involved in some brutal battle. The martial artists in the courtyard we wound up fighting first. They were unarmed, but they were able to channel elemental power through their hands and feet. Unlike magic, these elemental effects actually hurt since they weren't runes but actual energy. It was a relief that my skin was at least heatproof and sturdier than that of mortals. I kicked, punched, clawed, and otherwise beat them up, but they were very skilled, and there were a few of them. "***Iron Cage - Duration: 1 Day***," Michael said, just as one of them did an electrical punch. It appeared their elements were the real thing, as the lot of them in the cage got zapped and were knocked out by the charge.

"Don't think I owe you for this or anything!" I said to the angel. He smirked. He knew as well as I did that this was only something a giant tease would say. "Oh, it's no problem," Michael responded, fighting off his own martial artists. I tossed a couple of fireballs in their direction, scorching those guys just enough to take them out of the battle. Fair is fair, after all.

The remaining martial artists were black belt master ranks coming from one of the floors of the Monastery tower. Beyond simply knowing elemental ability, they could blend it together as *chi*. From my centuries alive, I had done some reading. There were rumors of what this power could do. A skilled practitioner could heal with a touch, or paralyze just by poking someone. They could even target pressure points. Michael simply closed his wings and expanded his personal aura, and they were unable to get close to him, so they all targeted me. I moved to slash at them with my claws, but they did some acrobatic trick and cartwheeled out of the way, then jabbed with their index and middle finger at specific parts of my arms pressing on about twenty or so regions along left arm, and climbed over my shoulder with terrific agility and did much the same to my left shoulder and arm. I have a strong body, able to regenerate and take a lot of punishment, but all of a sudden my arms went completely limp, as if I had just had a seizure. I could

lift them, but they immediately flopped to my side when I tried. I managed to keep them from disabling my neck or head or internal organs, by sheer dumb luck of stepping out of the way in time. They tried going for my legs, but since I didn't want to be crawling like a baby or stuck inside one of the angel's Medical Spheres, I reacted by blocking with my wings, and countering with my tail. My body has its own chakra system like humans, but there are a few regions that such attacks kinda... don't work on. My wings and tail are an offshoot of my spiritual anatomy and as such fully retractable. They could not be paralyzed since they had no pressure points to begin with. I made short work of those guys, being careful not to kill people. I didn't want to murder, not if I could help it. After these guys had been defeated, we headed toward the main tower of the Aiken Monastery, but our battle had apparently drawn the attention of some Druids. I could still move around, but I couldn't really lift my arms enough to toss any dark balls or fireballs, and I wasn't gonna test out Hellfire on these Druids. It was Michael's turn to battle.

MICHAEL

Casters always believe their long range makes them invincible, just as people with guns thought they couldn't be touched by a knife. Actually, it's possible for a normal human to rush someone trying to shoot someone, enough to stab them. How much more easily would it be for one such as me to stop someone from finishing what they were saying enough to halt their runes? I made quick work of nearly twenty Druids, likewise avoiding lethal force. As an archangel, I had to kill, and it didn't bother me as much as humans so long as it wasn't excessive, but this demon seemed to hate the sight of blood, so I did what I could. Perhaps later it wouldn't be an issue, but for now, she seemed relieved that some of them were still alive.

We worked our way up the tower of the Monastery, spotting straw dummies that were used to train chi attacks on the 16th floor. Those fighters earlier must have been from here. The 25th floor had the Make Aiken a Great Monastery Again group that Ambrosia told about as a funny story. But it didn't seem so funny now, with them armed with torches and pitchforks Not that those could hurt either of us, though.

“A demon!” one said. “And an angel,” said another. “We don't want your kind around these parts!” cried a third, pointing not to Lilith but to me. Typical. The third decided he liked the looks of Lilith though, for he said, “Hey baby! How about a horny woman like you give me some tail?” Lilith, clearly bothered by his unwanted advances, or perhaps entertained by them (this being more difficult to read than her aversion to murder), smirked and said, “As you wish!” Coiling her pointed organ around the man, she quickly penetrated him from the rear with her barbed tail. He began to bleed from the point shoved up there. “Don't worry! After you lose your virginity... back there, everything will be fine. But for now, you won't be able to sit down for a few weeks!” Yes, she was clearly a demon. The rest decided to venture to the bottom floor. As some of them were sorcerers, from the window we saw them instead focusing their energy on rebuilding what Lilith had smashed of the wall and gate. The man who had hit on her was limping around a bit, but did not seem overly upset.

We passed by a woman on floor 64, who urged us not to make too many people mad. She explained that they were only trying to defend their homeland from outsiders. Lilith nodded, “I understand. I just want to get to the top of this tower, and it seems like everyone's barring my way.” The woman nodded, “Yes, that's the way things are with us.” No sooner did she finish speaking than she too put up a powerful barrier. Fortunately, I had something for that without hurting her. “***Alter Attributes: Sword - Traits: Barrier Breaking, Duration: 1 Hour***,” I said. My sword became coated with a reddish energy, capable of cutting any barriers (except mine of course, mainly because I made it). I swung hard and broke down the field, along with most of the other barriers blocking us in floor above. The 97th floor no longer had necromancers, having done their job of constructing a save point, they probably left to rejoin Thanatos. On the 98th floor, Lilith and I booked a room for a few hours. No, not like that! We had just pushed our way through nearly 100 floors of extremely hostile people, and we needed to rest and meditate. Lilith's Lucre was no good outside of Hell, really. That's part of why it was money suited for Hell, it was the only suitable currency there, and worthless everywhere

else. Meanwhile, my money was good everywhere else. I pulled out a Record of Value, and the man proceeded to write a blank check for himself, of a rather huge amount. No, I'm not gonna mention it. Let's just say, even by today's standards it would ruin a small country if someone had to pay it. I'm pretty sure it wasn't that much in Gold, but humans tended to overcharge us angels, because our Record could pay any price, which the merchant could later exchange for Gold at face value. He wouldn't need to work again.

Our time together in the same hotel was pretty awkward, actually. Lilith apparently had pretty weird rules about modesty, not that the Nephilim race really cared much to start with, but watching her come out of the shower without bothering to use a towel, and sleeping in the nude was making me uncomfortable for some reason. But I decided to put up with it. Complaining about it would probably just make her try it more to annoy me or something. It didn't help. Since we had actually paid way more than the hotel was worth, the next day we found the deed to the hotel on the desk. As owner of the hotel, she kept doing stuff for me, cooking for me, trying to do sweet things for me.

I see. She must want this land instead of her house? "But won't you be lonely here too?" I asked. Lilith shook her head, "Demons will never accept me," she said. "But here, I will be able to make a go of things. Maybe people will accept me because I do good work." I refused, and we spent most of our time fighting. The room was ransacked as a result of our struggles, until finally we got to our quest again. Somehow or other I seem to have misplaced the paper, but no matter. That deed would wait until later.

After this, we left and headed towards the top. The 99th floor had Gwendolyn, who despite probably being for the most part a pacifist, I could tell Lilith strongly wanted to make an exception. "Ah! You made it! Let me invite you to the top floor," she motioned to the stairs. Lilith tried to attack her instead, but was slow enough to run afoul of Gwen's sensory abilities, and never managed to hit her. Lilith eventually gave up and joined the others on the top floor, hours late to the party. "Did I miss anything?" Lilith asked. Ambrosia had already gotten her last Crest, and was showing off several techniques, such as Opening/Closing, which let her make her body intangible or super hard (respectively), much like Vision from Marvel Comics, only she couldn't do the whole reaching inside a chest and solidifying it thing, because her moves all required dance steps. Or her Hold The Ball stance, which actually made a ball of energy that only wounded a certain amount without killing. After this, her Trigrams ability was basically obsolete, as it was able to be controlled by her instead of being random, and it was much faster. But I wonder, how did she get her powers in the first place?

CHAPTER 28

In which Ambrosia nearly ruins the world. Then Yazim Jianne does too.

AMBROSIA

As we made it to the top floor without much incident, we considered waiting for them, but they seemed to be taking awhile. But seeing as how they were several hours late, we eventually wandered to the top, where we talked once again with the Aiken master.

"You have returned, just as I asked. Have you come to answer the question I had for you?" the Aiken Master asked. It had been awhile. I asked, "What was it again?" The Aiken Master sighed, then explained, "I wanted to know, with all the power you're getting, what will you do with your power? You've seen it around you. The Council has fallen, the money is such that people can't spend, war is rampant, and people are suffering. You could easily topple the powers of this world and set things right."

I wasn't sure about that. I had some cool abilities, but most of them were close combat stuff, not like waving a sword around and causing entire mountainsides to avalanche. Well, I'd never tried to use my power on a massive scale. But... there felt like there was something wrong with this approach, so I decided to ask more questions. "Well," I said, "of course, I don't want to use it to hurt others, even though I'm told I need to use it on a certain demon, but knowing you, the answer's more complicated than that." He nodded.

He explained, "You've seen others with power. The whole adage 'absolute power corrupts absolutely' isn't quite true. There are those with power who have in fact used it

responsibly, and those who haven't. What do you think separated them? Why did Nevras's mother and father seek to keep peace between countries, and why did it fail? What was the real problem?" I thought about this for awhile, pacing around a bit. Finally, I guessed, pretty much, "It seems what corrupts is not the power, but the thirst for it. When people are given power with responsibility, or put into authority because a problem needs to be fixed, they are more likely to keep their self-control than those who overthrow countries and stuff. The other country wanted Phoenix for land, so war pretty much happened." He nodded, glowing with pride. I had guessed right?

He asked, "Good answer. Since power was pretty much given to you, I don't believe you fall into the latter category, but... how will you help people once you have it in full?" Hey. What's this about my power being just given to me?!? I kinda worked hard for it.

After some thought I answered, "Hmmmm... Well, I don't want to follow the example of the Council. They tried to keep governments from existing, by intervening in all the governments of the world. That's way too controlling and kinda hypocritical. On the other hand, if I do nothing, the world will crumble." There were a couple of options available to me. But I knew the obvious answer. If I gave up, Belial was going to destroy the world. I had to get my final Crest, and make a difference.

I asked for the Aiken Crest without explaining what I was going to do with it. I married Nevras, and like his mother, became ruler of the land of Phoenix. With my full Oracle powers, it was easy. I used my Four Gods and Thanatos Crest to take apart Kushiyama's army. I dismantled the new monetary system, and forced the remaining members of the Council to work together again. But there were always those who wanted to oppress others. Rather than finishing my quest versus Belial, I was too busy dealing with the Resistance. These fascists kept rising up to defeat me, and I put them down brutally. They had to be stopped! For years this went on, and I admit, while I was very good at dealing with revolts, the finer points of helping workers stay prosperous and farmers be productive and bridges and roads be in good repair were kinda lost on me. Now that the Resistance was gone, the citizens themselves were revolting. So I used my power on them too. Eventually, Belial became free, and destroyed everything anyway.

GOD

Well, that sucked. ***Reset.***

AMBROSIA

Hmmmm. Let's try a different path. I said, "I could interfere with others, but then I'd be taking the role of the Council. No thanks. On the other hand, being the Oracle is now part of my identity. If I did nothing, Belial would destroy or rule the world, and that would possibly be worse than anything I could do. Though maybe I'm wrong, I haven't really sat down and talked with him. Whatever. If people want advice after this, I'll give it. I'll help the Council, but only indirectly. They are probably still the best people for the job, and I don't like how things are now. But otherwise, I think I'll settle down and have a family once this is over." Nevras looked at me, and I couldn't tell what he was thinking, "Really?" Why was this a shock? "Pretty much, yeah," I said, "I want my own life, and I can't imagine making anyone give up theirs either. That's the way I'd want to 'help' others as you put it."

He seemed pleased again, "This answer is acceptable. I now entrust you with the final power of the Crest to unlock it." My hand glowed with the awesome power of all the Crests. And looking around, I noticed that Aiken Master glowed too. And suddenly, to our eyes, he was transformed. I saw this person cycle through many forms, black, white, Jewish, male, female, and I remembered what we had seen in Kushiyama. It was Jesus!

"What... how are you here? I thought Kushiyama forbade you from going anywhere," I said. The rapidly shifting person settled on the form of the girl, and then explained, "Yes, officially, I did keep my vow. But do you remember what my other name is? Emmanuel, or 'God is with us'. I am in all people, you, Nevras, even the people who bound me to this law, for I am the connection between God and humans. So you see, while my body is there, my spirit cannot be anything besides everywhere. I am Jesus in Kushiyama, the Aiken Master here, and I am Mu'ad Dib in Qurac."

Huh. I'd heard of Qurac. They weren't part of the Council because they had no

interest in anyone outside their town. And they had some weird religion. While Aiken had walls everywhere, and was all about borders, Jesus in Kushiyama wandered about without much protection at all and in fact was sealed inside, and Qurac was basically an isolated town in the middle of a desert. Wait a second... "How can this be? You're completely different from the guy in Kushiyama, and what he taught. How can you be the same person?" He smiled, "You remember how I died on the cross and got all those followers, right? Well, it could have made the world a better place, but of course things still continued to be fairly bad. And you know why? Because my later disciples held me up as some sort of morally perfect person, while those who saw their actions strongly opposed to my teachings became totalitarians and such. You understand the Tao, so you should understand that this is an imbalance. When I came again, I wanted to impress upon people that it was Grace (and forgiveness), rather than some moral law. We are supposed to love our neighbor, not try to hold me up on a pedestal. So I became several contradictory teachers, who nonetheless all preached different means of reaching harmony." I asked him another question, "So are you also the Buddha?" He shook his head, "I am *in* the Buddha, as I am in all creatures in existence. But no, unlike the Aiken Master and Mu'ad Dib, I have never been the Buddha directly. He is a human who attained Enlightenment, allowing him to remember his reincarnations, much like Zoe. He's a good friend of mine, though. He's a really cool guy!" Somehow, I got a mental image of Jesus and Buddha sharing an apartment in Japan, and started giggling. He smiled, "You guys will have an interesting life. Be good to each other! Oh yeah, and you may want to revisit that island." He touched my map and it glowed on a specific island, forming a clear dot on the map. "The portal to where Belial is trapped is there. If you want to stop him, you'll need to enter the Realm of Void." The Aiken Master resumed his form, and I started trying out my new techniques just in time for Lilith and Michael to rejoin us. "Did I miss anything?" Lilith asked.

THE WORLD

In this very same island, the sorcerer known as Yazim Jianne had managed to find all required materials toward releasing Belial. The urn was placed in the center of the circle, and the keys (which were basically some type of crystal) started glowing. The ground shook as by an earthquake, and the urn which before had to have a special summoning ritual to show Belial, now had a steady stream of black smoke pouring from just below its lid. The sorcerer, Yazim Jianne, was pleased. He believed his goals were at hand. "I have done as you command, Master. I have gathered the instruments to your freedom from that Urn. I await your reward," he boasted. Yazim Jianne waited patiently for him to respond, to hear that he would get his reward after all. "Well? " he asked, "you promised on your honor as a demon..." Obviously, Yazim Jianne had not watched much media, or he would know that demonic promises were no good.

The black smoke thickened into a rough image of Belial, which began to chuckle and then guffaw like an evil demon. Which, he kind of was. "HUUHAHAHAHAHAHAH!!!" Belial laughed. When unsealed, Belial's voice could be clearly heard. If Yazim Jianne had heard his real voice, tainted with evil, he never would have trusted him in the first place. As it was, even the insane sorcerer began to be nervous.

"YOU FOOL! WHAT TALES HAVE YOU EVER HEARD OF DEMONS KEEPING THEIR OATHS? DEMONS DO NOT EVEN POSSESS HONOR! FAR FROM RAISING YOUR WIFE, I SHALL DOOM YOUR WORLD TO THE VOID! AND AS FOR REWARDS... TRY THIS ON FOR SIZE!" he said. He waved his hands around, generating a large ball of Hellfire. Belial focused it in a circle around Yazim Jianne, then tightened it, closer and closer, intending to snuff him out of existence. The sorcerer had his own bag of tricks though. "[illegible]!" he incanted, forming a Gate under his feet. Yazim Jianne fell through the hole to somewhere, anywhere, but before he reached the other end of the portal, the Hellfire burned at the Gate. Normal spells were made of runes and gave out energy, and would follow people through the Gate, while Hellfire disrupted spells instead. The Gate fell apart, leaving Yazim Jianne somewhere away from Belial's grasp. "BLAST IT!" exclaimed Belial, "HE ESCAPED! I MUST FULFILL MY CONTRACT TO THE VOID WITHOUT INTERFERENCE. BY THE POWERS THAT BE, I SWEAR THAT WHEN THE LIGHT AND DARK ARE ONE, SO TOO WILL FALL THE DIVISION BETWEEN THE TWO WORLDS! AS THE SUN ECLIPSES THE MOON, SO TOO WILL FALL THE DIVISION BETWEEN THE TWO WORLDS! AS THE SUN ECLIPSES THE MOON, SO TOO LET THE VOID ECLIPSE THIS FRAGILE EARTH!" On the ground near the urn, a large circle formed as

though some unseen hand had written it, laying the foundations for what is to come. Obviously, it was a pentagram, because all pentagrams are evil, and this isn't an oversimplification. But yeah, this magic circle looked very very evil, probably since it was also created by an actual demon. The circle was inscribed with markings in several languages, such as Qurac, Unified Japanese, and Greek, all saying the same thing, «**इस दुनिया में बुराई को आने दो** », «**Αφήστε το κακό να έρθει σε αυτόν τον κόσμο** » « **讓邪惡來到這個世界**» In other words, it said, «Let evil come to this world.» The heavens shook. Quite literally, in fact. Natural disasters rocked Heaven for a second, although God had made Heaven and Earth so it could not be undone, except maybe by his own hand. This spell certainly tried though. The evil spirits were released through a crack in the Afterlife, and possessed the living on Earth. The sky darkened, and an eclipse covered not just part of the land but all of it.

Unlike most eclipses though, it didn't end there. The eclipse that started as a simple lunar eclipse began to alternate, sun and moon, Yin and Yang, back and forth, until finally, the moon somehow took some of the light of the sun, making the sun black and the moon a red as blood. The two split again, leaving the state of things rather messed up. A dimensional rift, not a Gate, for a Gate was contained, formed around the mystic circle. And the stars themselves began to lose their light and fall like meteors, as they were sucked into the Realm of Void along with some sections of water, land, and air. A small urn also entered inside, despite the wishes of its prisoner. Meanwhile, strange things began to enter from the land of Void. Ghouls were common enough visitors already, but now some greater ghouls, and even Monsters began to roam the land. Antimagic seeped out along with some of the technology of that world. As more and more matter and energy traded places, the process of merging appeared to slow for the time being.

As this was going on, the war between Phoenix and Kushiyama continued. Ghobli and Galaxia sided with Kushiyama, while Zuran and Aquamundo sided with Phoenix, so naturally, battle spread to those regions too. Galaxia had ships and crude submarines dropped depth charges , but they were chumps compared to a civilization deep under the waves that could attack them with tidal magic and enormous sea creatures. Zuran, dared do no violence near Aiken Monastery, so they fought mainly on the large deserts to the south, near Goji and the former state of Seikai. What they failed to note was just how much this war would piss off all the many spirits in this region, and many Exorcisms were undone. Soon, the only forces still in battle were Phoenix and Kushiyama. They fought with infantry, with mechs and golems, and with cavalry made up of everything from horses to ostrogoths to walruses. They had fought for a long time, so Phoenix tried a strategy. While King Charis's main force sent their wizards and dragons and knights from the north caves near the Eastern Continent, they sailed ships to sneak in from the south through the mountain pass.

King Charis was a brave and charismatic leader. He always led his troops from the front. King Yama, on the other hand, was a coward. While his forces fought off superior forces quite well from the north, he was caught from behind and killed by a flank attack. While it is tempting to see Phoenix as “heroic” or something because they ended the war while Kushiyama started it, the truth is war is seldom cut and dry. Survivors often look like they've gone through a meat grinder. Or worse, they look okay, but inside are an empty husk. And yet, the rule of a despot ended. But... Council rules required representatives from all of its founding nations. With King Yama gone, how would the Council survive?

BAHAMUT

I suppose it's odd that I should be narrating right here, but as a dragon, I had a unique perspective, as I got to see a round trip of sorts that the others simply couldn't witness. My sharp eyes could see much of what they did outdoors, and I could hear some of their conversation. I think. But it was kind of a bird's eye view, so to speak.

Ambrosia and the others parked their boat in Phoenix. It was easier logistically, now that the economies were all screwed up and inoperable. Why did people do this? You can't buy human suffering! They blew the whistle, and I came even though I was contentedly munching away in the local flora and fauna around Galaxia. I didn't care

much for the war going on nearby, but they did their best to keep their battles away from me. I did get to see some action though, like when I blew up a warship too close to me.

I flew straight there, urging them to get on my back. Having rested, I was more than able to carry the full group of them now, though I still wasn't thrilled at hauling a pet rock around. I was a smart dragon, so I figured out from the map where this island was. I knew better to enter the island from too high in altitude though, as there had been a vortex that had been pulling things in. I could feel it from the powerful gravitational disturbance in the air. And so, I landed at the base of this island, and observed them from afar.

Ambrosia's hand began to glow, and so did a nearby rock wall with a matching image of eight Crests of trigrams on it. Mountain, Lake, Water, Fire, Wind, Thunder, Heaven, and Earth. Each of these was tied to an Oracle, according to legend, and each of them was part of the whole that was the Oracle's power. Ambrosia didn't understand it yet, but I knew the legends. The Tao is a whole, not only the parts. These eight trigrams have impressive power, but nothing compared with the Tao itself. She was not done yet, if the legends are true.

The mountain opened up, and I watched the others climb up. I watched them from a safe distance. They walked up the mountain, climbing up a steep hill for quite some time before reaching the peak. When they reached the top, they pointed at something in the portal. I looked, and there was indeed something strange about the portal. "We can't enter it yet," said Aqorm, "not with that right now." Azrael said something along the lines of, "We'll take care of it. Don't worry." Then I saw the strangest thing, most of them walked all the way back down and Ambrosia shouted, "Hey Bahamut! Take us to Hinata. We're taking a break and relaxing for a change."I was confused but agreed to take them there.

Hinata is far to the south, but since the poles are east-west, it has a tropical climate with a very nice long stretch of beach line. There are cliffs to the sides, but overall, Hinata is viewed as resort location with its hot springs, waterfalls, and forests to the southeast. I had heard there were trolls over in that direction though, so we mainly stayed close to town. Like Goji, Hinata had very Asian architecture, and the locals seemed to match. I dropped the group off, and they seemed to have some trouble communicating with the locals, but eventually Nevras and Ambrosia went to the hot spring to the north edge of town. The spring was a pool sectioned in with rock, entered by walking past a *torii* archway and split off into sides by a divider of wood, but Ambrosia and Nevras ignored it and entered the same area. They arrived near the off-season, for they had been traveling quite a long time by boat. From winter when they started, according to the stories they had told Michael and Lilith and me, up to the point where they had actually met us, to when everything started happening recently, it had been almost a full year. And what a lot of things had changed in that time! It was the 10th day of Dog. As you know, the months are based on the Chinese zodiac, and the weekdays on elements. It has been this way since the New Earth started. The year was broken up into four seasons of exactly 3 months: for summer there was Tiger, Dragon, and Rooster; for fall, there was Snake, Horse, and Ox; winter was Dog, Sheep, and Rabbit; and spring came again with Rat, Pig, and Monkey. So to say the 10th day of Dog, this means December 10. Very few people still celebrated Christmas, as it wasn't a well known holiday anymore. But there was a rumor about a small town which appeared only during the holidays just east of Kirin, that had some mysterious man with a red suit and hat lived with reindeer, a child, and a way too hot elf wife.

As I say, it was off-season, although not yet the point of actual snow. As a result, the two of them appeared to have a choice between hot water and ice cold rain and would probably be dunking and coming up the whole time. They stripped to their undergarments to bathe, and I decided to give them privacy. After some time, Nevras walked out alone. Ambrosia stayed a half-hour later before she also left the spring.

Time passed, and it became night. The group headed to a pub in town, a building built in a different style from houses around it, obviously intended to cater to tourists. Dragons can transform into human form, but they have to create a gigai, a layer of false flesh in order to do it. I was not doing to subject myself to discomfort just so I could get a few drinks and join them. I spent the night hunting nocturnal birds as I watched Ambrosia and Nevras head to the inn, probably to sleep early. Elias and Aqorm had gone to this pub

(funny, but I didn't see him as a type to do heavy drinking), along with Michael and Lilith. As I waited outside, I saw a spirit of Azrael floating near me. “Have you died?” I asked. The spirit shook her head, “This is my astral form. I won't be able to maintain it very long. The two of us have exorcised demons and Monsters at the portal. We're going to take a breather at the shore of the island. Tomorrow, you're welcome to join us.” An hour later, Elias was chasing Aqorm outside, shouting, “You know what you did! I won't forgive you for that until you apologize!” Lastly, at around final call for the night, Lilith dragged Michael over her shoulder. It was late, so I headed to rest at a nearby forest.

The next day, I flew the remainder of the party back to that island. The rift had stabilized into a regular Gate, and was no longer sucking matter inside or pulling it out. I was able to land much closer as a result. The group rejoined Azrael and Zoe, who looked much stronger as a result of fighting difficult battles, but were tired enough that I hoped they didn't encounter anything inside. They stepped ever closer to the Gate, obviously nervous but willing to enter a strange new world. But then... “ I think this is as far as we go together,” said Nevras. “Sorry.” Ambrosia looked shocked, as was I, from my rather distant perspective overhead, knowing little about their problems. “But why?” she asked. He sighed, and then made up something that was obviously an excuse, “I don't really feel like I know you that well yet, and going to another world takes a lot of commitment. I'm just not ready. Besides, I've got obligations to take care of at home... You know, at the palace.” She sighed, “I understand.” He got on my back, whispering, “Take me home, please.”

NEVRAS

There are many reasons why I could have left. But let's talk about some of them. I'll start from the top, where we went up the hill with the big portal. The portal as it was, was more than a little unstable, so we looked closer. I saw a black tentacle extending from the portal, for just a second. I stepped back. Then I saw five or six hands try to reach for us. “Looks like there's Monsters and Elder Formless inside the portal,” I said. “We can't enter it yet,” said Aqorm, “not with *that* right now.” Azrael said, “We'll take care of it. Don't worry.” As we flew off, I noticed Zoe casting spells into the rift, while Azrael used Exorcism and Banishment. I didn't envy them, fighting strange beings nonstop while we rested at a resort, but they had volunteered for this.

We were dropped off at the entrance to Hinata while Bahamut decided to do... dragon things. We humans however, settled on exploring the town. «日向宿 » it read. We asked Elias to translate everything, so he did. “Hinata Inn,” he said. I looked at the quaint architecture of the cottage, as we entered the building. Apparently, a monk of some sort was running the temple, as he was dressed in strange robes and carried around a staff similar to the one we had seen when fighting Alexander, what Elias called a shakujo. He asked us something, “滞在しますか？ 僧侶として、私は請求しません.” Elias explained that he asked if we wanted to stay, said he was a monk, and that he wouldn't charge us. Which was good, lately our money had been no good anyway. We booked a room for a night, and then explored the town some more. Along with loads of houses around the neighborhood (which were no good because we'd run into people who would say something like “わかりません” as I'd heard frequently from people who didn't understand us on the street), there was a pub run mainly for foreigners, a Taoist temple, a surf shop, and a hot springs. I later learned that the surf shop was run as a secondary business for the Taoist temple to supplement their income.

The Taoist temple was set up differently from what we would know about temples in Western culture. The Jewish and Christian services are basically identical except possibly in their approach to atonement, and a few Jewish-specific prayers. A Christian service involved lighting the candles, then readings, then psalms and prayer, a sermon to interpret the readings, songs between some of these, a confession and forgiveness of sins, communion, and then the candles were snuffed and dismissal. It might have bread or wine, but I think this was mainly for Messianic Jews. I'm not sure. Most of this was stuff was Elias explaining to us, so I got mixed up between the two religions, but here I could tell the difference between that church in Kushiyama and this temple. Christian temples ranged from wood and plaster (usually white) to marble or stone cathedrals. They were not typically painted elaborately, but had simple structure and possibly stained glass.

Jewish temples were also pretty simple, letting the building simply act as a vessel and not draw attention to itself. The Taoist temple apparently didn't get the memo, as its design was ummm... garish. The walls were covered with paintings, and sections of the room had red plaques with yellow lettering, there were tables and stools, flowers, and artwork. It looked like it had been arranged this way to provide *feng shui* balance or something, but it also wound up looking like color exploded inside this room. As my senses calmed down, I looked around and saw several familiar things. First, the side walls had those Trigrams that I saw on Ambrosia's hand. Then, I noticed the Four Gods were painted in the corners of this room, in each of the cardinal directions. I noticed the building itself was octagonal, and seemed to be a giant trigram itself. Finally, I managed to puzzle out the significance of all of the objects in the room, and suddenly, it didn't feel like a mess at all, but everything laid out according to plan. Taoist ceremony goes a little different from Jewish and Christian. It starts with building a sacred space, yes, much like lighting the candles in the other cases, but this was a ritual in itself. Next, there was the performance from the Taoishi (a Great Master) and his four assistants. These people did the whole service, from processions and dances to songs and prayers. Unlike the other two, Taoism focuses on orthopraxy, meaning the slightest wrong dance step or bad note could ruin everything. He burned talismans in an incense burner, he initialed documents, and so on. It was almost like watching someone pray to some sort of divine accountants, it was sacred and yet very bureaucratic. At one point, he rose and performed the "dance of the stars," or Taiyi, where he went into almost a fetal position as he said prayers and such to the universe, climbing small steps to the altar. There he presented the memorial. The memorial was a petition to the gods, stating the name and purpose of the ritual, its date and location, the names and addresses of the participants, and a vow (different from service to service). Standing again, the master burned the memorial and scattered the ashes, gathered his escorts, said some more prayers, sang more music, and then the ritual space was undone. Then as he started breaking down the ritual space, all talismans, writs, and other markers of the ritual space were burned. It was interesting, but I wasn't sure what I was seeing without explanation from Elias.

I left the temple, and most of the others wanted to go back to the inn, but I went to the Hinata Spring, or as the sign said, «为性收拾世界» Huh, that didn't say “Hinata Spring.” Even I knew that. This bath was nude bathing only, as the spring was meant for healing and relaxation, and there were strict rules against bathing suits. I gathered my clothes in the container provided, and put on a towel before entering the pool. I had already begun to soak when another towel dropped near me. I turned around to see Ambrosia's lovely nude body. I saw her curvy hips and her somewhat heavy breasts, which dropped a bit without support. I had always seen her in that silly housewife outfit (well except for when we were in Hell, that is, and there we spent a lot of time arguing). It was raining, and it was the start of winter, so I didn't much time to ogle her before we both were so cold and wet that we ducked down into the springs at about shoulder level to keep warm with the icy rain. “There's... there's supposed to be no mixed bathing!” I protested. She responded, “Yes, but you went into the wrong side. This is the women's section.” I see.

Some time passed, in awkward silence. “The water is pretty nice,” I said, trying to break the silence. She did talk, but on a completely different subject. It had been several weeks since we had talked, and it felt like we were on different wavelengths as to what we wanted and what we worried about. Her first thoughts were of her mission, as she said, “You know, soon we'll probably defeat Belial, and his people, what happens then?” So I asked her, “What do you mean?” She said, “Well, after our quest, we might just split up and never travel together again. I want more time with you...” She leaned forward as if to kiss me. All of a sudden, a bird dive-bombed us and pecked at her.

We had been together for quite a while, but for some reason, we could never get close. Not emotionally, because she held her feelings under lock and key. Not physically, because whenever we tried to kiss, it failed. There was the attempt to do so on the mountain where we spent time training under Lao Tzu. But the whole thing was interrupted when everyone started gawking, and besides she didn't even remember it. Then there was the pub at Gruumi, where she started looking for her keys when it was

clear I wanted to kiss her. And then when I wanted to have a serious talk with her, water sploshed me on the boat. Was it a sign?!? Were we not supposed to be with each other?

That night, we slept in the same bed. I saw the others sneak out to the bar, but we stayed in. No, not slept together, we kinda cuddled close instead until going to sleep. But while Ambrosia relaxed and slept in my arms, I was preoccupied. Thinking back on it, I should have told myself to shut up, because I was ruining what we had. But at the time, I couldn't stop thinking. I decided that the reason all of this happened was because of destiny. Now, I'd seen Ambrosia change destiny on a regular basis, but I always felt trapped by it, born into the position of royalty. What could I possibly do to make things work? I was stuck, as I saw it. I began thinking of other excuses why we shouldn't be together. Ummm, I mean reasons... that's it, reasons. Like, my family was royalty, and there were certain expectations of me, while she had a weird life and a weird past, and anyway she would never belong in court. And then there was the whole deal where I felt like somehow her amnesia was all a show and that she was hiding things from me, so there was missing trust. And then there was the whole fact that we were going into a world where according to legend, the world slowly erased people from existence. That sort of thing really puts a damper on romances, you know? Eventually, I wasn't sure what reason was the real reason, or even if there was a real reason. I finally fell asleep from exhaustion more than anything.

When I woke up, Bahamut flew into our town, freaking out all of the villagers. She told us that Azrael and her beau had gotten rid of all the evil critters, and now the portal was safe again. Her tail hit one of the houses on the way out, and she apologized before managing to get aloft and heading for that mountain. Then we came to the mountain, and as I walked toward the edge of the portal, I suddenly couldn't manage anymore. I lied and told her something about obligations at home. I don't remember what I said exactly, since it was just whatever I could say to keep her from following me back to Phoenix.

As I rode Bahamut back home, wind whipping my hair around, I asked Bahamut, “Hey ummm, can we chat?” She said, “Hold on, I'll drop you at Phoenix where there's ground.” She landed at the foot of Phoenix Castle. Bahamut took a moment, and she surrounded her body with a gigai, crunching her bones down to fit inside the much smaller skin. “Clothing,” she said, and I scrounged around my backpack for ummm... extra clothes. Obviously not mine, of course. A girl with green eyes, and onyx hair that glistened like the rainbow with a borrowed brown cotton dress looked back at me. “Well? What did you want to talk about?” I opened with a question, “Bahamut, have you ever been in love?” She shook her head, “Dragons don't reproduce sexually, so we only form close friendships. Romance isn't really a thing.” I must have looked confused as I asked, “But wait, Tiamat was male! How can...?” She nodded, “Females of the dragon race produce fertile eggs, but our males are sterile. We produce our men more often than our women, so I suppose the males love us as their mothers, but we don't really feel any romance for them.” I wondered, “Does Ambrosia feel that way about me? Was it one-sided? Is that why things never got serious?”

She giggled, “C'mon now! I don't personally know about love, but I've seen you humans. I know it when I see it. She's definitely into you! What's really the problem?” I explained my weird fortune. Her giggle turned into a noblewoman's laugh, “Ohohohoho! You silly human! If you love her, tell her how you feel! Don't let your terrible luck ruin your life! You go to her.” I thought about it and said, “You know what? I will go back to her! I can change my destiny. Only...” She asked, “Only, what?” I explained, “Only, she's probably given up and gone in by now. My best chance is to wait at the portal, because I'll get separated if I try to go after her inside there. It's a big world in there, but she'll have to come out there!” And so, I waited for a long time near the coast of the mountain. Eventually, they told legends about people like me. You've heard some of them. Greyfriar's Bobby, the *Odyssey*, and *Evangeline*. Those didn’t turn our so well...

CHAPTER 29

Quod Ambrosia intrat inanis et vacua. What? Latin is mandatory when using Gates.

AQORM

So, stuff happened at the bar. My memory is a bit foggy though... Urgh, why did I have to drink so much? We elves can detox poison better than you humans, but it's about as crude. Meaning, I wouldn't all the weakness and dizziness and headaches of a hangover, but I'll be throwing up the rest of the night. ***bluuurgh*** As I was saying, ummm... what was I saying? Elias approached me and accused, “You know what you did! I won't forgive you for that until you apologize!”

Oh yeah, something happened tonight. “Uhhhh, so what happened, Elias?” I asked the very peeved scholar who smelled strangely bad tonight. “Come on now,” he said, “think back!” And so, excusing myself to flush out the last of the alcohol from my system (violently), I cleared my head and thought hard about what happened that night. I was a little bleary and weak from getting rid of most of the contents of my stomach, but most of the hangover was already fading and things were coming into focus.

Hmmmm, let's see, while all the others attended a boring temple service, I rented a surfboard. I can't say I know anything about balancing on the surfboard, so I belly-boarded instead. Even amateurs could do this, with cheap plastic boards, and something about this called to my aquatic elf nature. The waves crashed softly against the sand, and there was a sort of natural rhythm to its movement. The waves were rough, but I breathed in and out, relaxing my body. I faced slightly toward the shore, feeling for that right moment, and just as the wave came up, I laid the board down, and resting my shoulders to my stomach I hunkered down on the board. My left hand was at shoulder-level and my right hand was level with my midsection, skimming the board just above the surface of the water as it hit. Typically, people tried to push hard against the waves, but I felt differently, finding that it was more fun to just let the water guide me. I had to move some, but it was more a matter of catching the right current than looking for the best wave. I did this for a few hours, until at last Elias had finished his trip to the temple and found me goofing off like the heretic I am.

While those two snuck off to the hot springs like it wasn't completely obvious what they intended to do (I mean c'mon, I can read a bit of Unified Japanese, and that clearly reads something I'd rather not mention), Elias and I had ordered a nice quiet meal at the local pub before we had a drink. He said something about it being important to have a full stomach before drink to reduce to likelihood of becoming seriously drunk.

As restaurants go, this was a pub in the middle of a largely Asian town, so you might think that we'd have maybe some rice, vegetables, pork, and some sauce. Nope. Apparently, they had taken cues from the *Ever Night* drama of 2018, for their house special in the Chinese/Japanese fusion pub served pizza, celery sticks, hot wings, and spaghetti. I groaned. Tourism!

Since just letting the pub decide my drink felt like a bad option, I ordered plum wine and high quality saké. While it might appear I had classy taste in alcohol, don't worry. I proved otherwise when I added for good measure, “and keep it coming!” The saké was served from a white and blue porcelain container which looked like it survived from 1740 AD, lasting through creation of the New Earth, and would probably not last the night with an angel and a demon in the same pub. The plum wine was a gallon wine jug, so I helped myself. Elias abstained, probably because it killed brain cells and he wanted to keep all of his, but probably also because one of us was gonna need to make sure that I managed to get home safely. I drank and talked to Elias, then looked around the room.

Over to my right, I saw Lilith and Michael at the bar right next to us, with Michael looking very drunk. They had come some time while I was drinking, and I was too drunk to notice them until now. Angels can detox from a wide range of poisons and cannot become addicted or experience withdrawal, but drugs still affect them. “Heey, there, wha'cha doin'?” he said to me, “I dunno why I'm always so mad at tha'demon over there sh'holds her drink bett'r'n me.” I said, “Wow, he's a lush! How many has he had?” Lilith laughed, “One...” I interrupted, “One bottle?” Lilith shook her head, and used her thumb

and index fingers for emphasis on small amount, “One sip.” I guess angels must have really low body weight. In any case, he was pretty messed-up for much of the night.

The tables to the right had equally interesting characters, a man in a rice farmer hat drinking tea while sitting near some radishes while drawing and sheathing a sword, and a man hitting on a Christian nun to our right. The tables to our northeast had a man who was really into a girl that was taller and bigger than him, and a table to our immediate northwest was filled with five men competing for one woman. It looked like one was a kid who was attracted by how grown up she looked, another was an old guy who she was actively rejecting despite him talking about pursuing guys with experience, two guys were just horny for her, despite her appearing more interested is women than these guys, and the last was an elf who like me was entertained by the fact that this was someone like Nevras, a “girl” who looked convincing with soft cheekbones and no Adam's apple. There was no fooling our heightened senses, though. I looked at the bartender, who declared that she had also been Hinata's Elder, and the leader of Council once. Lajila, she said her name was. She slowly sipped some alcohol herself, and let out a long sigh.

As we sat in the bar, Elias's lack of drink meant he was babbling nervously instead of just getting drunk and cutting loose. Since I was bored, and about to make terrible impulse-impaired decisions, I ignored him entirely and focused on what Lilith was saying. “So what's it like being a demon?” I asked her. Lilith said, “Oh, you know, I constantly get these urges...” I asked, “Really?” She laughed and shook her head, “No! I'm normal, except with horns.” I noticed that unlike Michael, she was on about her eighth glass, and I didn't even notice a slur in her speech. I could detox well but this was crazy! “How... how can you keep drinking like that?” I asked her. She explained that while her heart still beat (unlike that of most demons), she had more in common with a corpse than a living body with regard to being affected by poisons and such. “Completely immune,” she said, “I could drink a whole distillery and not even get a buzz. I can still taste though.” I changed the subject, “So... why do you and Michael fight so much? It can't just be because you're demons & angels.” Lilith explained, “The truth? It's an act. Sure, there is bad blood between demons and angels, but most of it's because of some war in Heaven eons ago. We're really from the same race, the Nephilim. Any length of time together and we understand this, and respect each other's fighting ability. He'll never let me say that when he's sober, and there are certainly some things for us to fight about. But when you get right down to it, nope, we're just acting.” Huh, I thought all this time they hated each other. “I'm worried whether we'll see each other, after this is all over. Or will there even be a world to go back to?” I complained. “I dunno about the others, but you guys gave me an excuse to leave Hell. I'm not going anywhere,” she replied.

She broke my line of questioning, “Hey, you've been asking me a lot of questions. Tell me something about yourself.” I answered, “I'm a half-elf, I have two siblings, a cat named Momo, and we all live in a mansion near Kushiyama.” Lilith asked some more, “What's your family's business? I mean, how do you guys keep a huge mansion?” Sober, I didn't want to answer this question, and I got made when Elias found this out. But drunk, I had less of a problem with this, and I felt like Lilith wouldn't judge. And yet, I mumbled, “They're kinda...” Lilith said, “Hmmmm? Speak up.” I said, “Exotic dancers.” Lilith teased, “What's that? It sounded like you said exotic dancers.” I blushed. “It's not for money,” I explained, “my mom had rigid and uptight parents, who wanted her working as an accountant, and she wouldn't have it. She played along for awhile, then suddenly quit, and set up her own dance club. Her husband met her there, as he was also sick of elven ways.” Lilith looked pensive for a second, “But it seems like you took a step backwards from what they've done. You couldn't handle your parents' ways, so you ditched, and tried to make it as a musician.” I shook my head, “That's not it. I get stage fright. And it's easier to cope with when you have a huge piano as a buffer between you and the crowd.”

Elias who had been busy trying to impress me with conversation, and had not realized with all the loud music and weird lighting in the bar that I was talking to Lilith, caught her attention. So she asked, “Hey Aqorm, how do you feel about Elias, anyway?” I was pretty drunk so I just started blurting out stuff. “He's an arrogant know-it-all. Just tonight, he's talked about three or four things I had no interest in, acting like he knew best!” At this point, Elias stopped talking and started paying attention. But I just kept on talking

trash. He scowled at me. Lilith, seeing me rant and rave about Elias asked me, “How many drinks have you had?” While about 10 or so drinks could kill a human woman of my size, I was fine. “I've only had about six drinks,” I said. Elias and Lilith were both calmer than Ambrosia would have been, since they knew about our physiology. I was barely drunk, I could still think rationally, and speak without slurring. “If you're not drunk, you must have lost your mind... Are you feeling alright?” Lilith asked.

“I'm not drunk!” I shouted, “And I'm not crazy either! I know what I'm saying. Day in and day out, all I hear from him is something he got out of some book! Why can't he for once just face me as himself! Why not?” Lilith backpedaled, “Aqorm, I seriously don't want to start a fight with your friends...” I argued, “ Why not? Why must you...” Lilith at this point became angry and frustrated, “Why?!? How about this? Every single man in my life has either been afraid of me damning them with my "evil," or comes after me looking to be tempted. Michael is different, but he's... well an angel. How can you possibly understand about it?” Her voice was raw and she was emotional right now. Elias listened intently. I was starting to feel a bit funny and my heart beat fast, so maybe I was more drunk than I thought? “But I do,” I said, “Elias, as annoying as he is, is the first man to really be kind to me. I got some real losers, while hanging out on the street. I just wish some man would pay attention to me.”

And then, she said something shocking. She said, “Forget men.” Elias, finally listening to us while drinking tea, spit out his drink. As for me, I decided I was drunk, for my brain needed to process that again. I asked her to repeat it. “You heard me,” she said. Yes, I guess I did, but was she saying what I thought...? “Men will never really understand a woman. Why, just look at how little Elias understands you.” I looked at him, and thought about how this man spent much of his time trying to impress me with facts. But what I wanted was someone to have feelings for me. More and more, I felt like Lilith and Elias were two halves of a person that I really wanted in my life. Elias did have similar interests, and a kind heart, and he satisfied my intellect. But my body had needs as well, needs that this emotionally awkward man probably couldn't meet.” I asked, “Are you trying to tempt me, Lilith?” She shook her head, “Oh give it a rest! We both know if you want to do something, you'll do it.” And so it was, that in full view of Michael and Elias, we started kissing each other.

Ummm, back to the present. “I'm sorry. You're jealous of my starting a romance with Lilith, aren't you?” I asked Elias. He shook his head, “No, you're apologizing for wrong thing. I know I'm not the romantic type. I know you want someone to give you pleasure and have relations with. As long as I stay in your life, I want you to be happy. No, what I'm mad about is what came after.” I shook my head, “Refresh my memory?” He went into detail about all that came after. How after witnessing him stare at me earlier, I took several more shots of plum wine, and how I finally got enough, and managed to vomit all over his robe. “I don't normally sweat the small things... but it's been a real nuisance to clean,” Elias said.

We headed to sleep that night, most of it with him grumpy at me. The next morning, we left for the island with the portal. So, at the portal, drama happened. But you know all about that. What you don't know is what happened next. Ambrosia, before getting broken up with, was psyched to go and explore this new world, despite the whole thing with horrible creatures and even actual Monsters possibly on the other side. Now, she looked deflated, unable to concentrate, and just in a generally empty place. After a few seconds, she pretended to be cheerful, “Okay! Let's head inside!” Even Elias, socially dense as he was, looked concerned, “Ambrosia...” The portal showed a vision of the world inside, a world of bland scenery, grays and greys. She stepped inside. “Wait, Ambrosia!” said Michael following closely after her. Then came Elias, Zoe and Azrael, Lilith, and then it was my turn. I lingered, and then finally stepped in just in time to see a large dragon heading in this direction. The portal closed, never to open again, until our quest completed.

ELIAS

I meant every word I said. I do love Aqorm, but I was taught that if you love someone, you cannot keep them trapped if they also love another. Therefore, whatever

Aqorm decides, even a threesome, I will accept. Although, I only like her, but her partner I see as a proxy for what I can't give her. I have read some theory about Atman, you see...

Having come about fifteen seconds after Michael, I noticed that Michael had been talking to Ambrosia for about fifteen minutes, trying to cheer her up. She didn't seem quite as sad, and by the time the Zoe and Azrael came together, thirty minutes had passed. Based on this, I figured the time difference to be 1 to 60 ratio, meaning if we spent three days on Earth, about half a year would pass inside here. This meant that if someone waited on Earth for more than a year, there was a good chance the person wasn't coming back. Well, after runes were discovered, people did begin to live longer. But still...

I remembered my studies. Ancient researchers who explored this place by portal discovered several traits about this world and were careful to record their notes. This world had no sun or stars, and one would expect it to be cold, but it wasn't. Heat and cold were things, but this world was not a world of things. It was a world of nothing. Oh yes, there are air to breathe, water to drink, and ground to walk on. But they weren't much to speak of. The water that was sucked in was gone already, and the stars that fell could not be seen. The sky above was empty but for a black emptiness that felt like the Void. The ground was not really grey, but the air tinted everything grey. I knew why there was air, sea, and earth here. This was the First Universe.

Long ago, before solid matter formed, there was a blueprint universe according to legend. These blueprints of things were the real thing, the First Matter. Just as in Plato's Cave, there are people strapped to a wall of a cave only seeing shadows, the shadows of what we called the real world of New Earth are breakable versions of the things in the First Universe. Long ago, the Earth was corrupted by Belial, and destruction threatened to end everything. But it seemed as though when God split the world, he passed all of the corruption over to here, this world were things don't get destroyed. So, while the water and earth were grey and would constantly decay, much like the Nothing in Fantasia, when it swallowed up everything but that tower in the middle. But the land, sea, and sky would also constantly renew themselves. They did this so quickly that we wouldn't notice anything. However, living things were a different story. This realm had a lack of what is called ontological inertia. That is to say, a child believes when they no longer look at things that they cease to exist, but this was actually the case here. The grey fog of this land would start to eat our hands, our feet, and finally everything but our soul. The only way to undo this was to find an Oasis, an area where the Void had a gap in its power, just as an oasis in a desert was a non-absence of water. Or we could find a town. Such places were recognizable since unlike the pervasive grey in this world, they had colors. I looked at my friends. They were gradually turning grey themselves. This was the first step, before limbs started to fade and finally disappear.

I explained the need for urgency here, so the others didn't stand around. We had to get to safety quickly. Our first destination was what looked like an actual oasis off in the distance, making it an Oasis in both senses of the world. There was First Wood, First Earth, and First Water. We drank, and never felt thirsty again for our entire journey in the Realm of Void. I chopped the First Wood up using Ambrosia's knife, only to watch the trees which had been cut start to regrow themselves. I made a fire, which I ultimately had to snuff with the Water, because it never burned itself up, and shaped a crude First Clay container for carrying things. We brought some First Water with us, just in case. Then we rested while our limbs returned to us, and the color returned to our faces, clothing, and bodies. When day broke, we set to work building a raft. Lashing leaves and branches to tie wood cuttings together, we managed to get the whole thing to stay together. It helped that the trees which were cut quickly regrew themselves, and that the ropes we made seemed to want to make things stick together.

I checked our map. It had changed from the writing before, where it mentioned «The Known World» and now instead said, «The Realm of Void.» The map depicted a very dark area on the outside of this world, then a squiggly section inside that which had land and water, rivers, and towns. Such as they were. The runes showed our current position. There was a Tower of Sorrow and an area called the Void Wastes surrounding a Mountain of Fate in the northern island, Belial's Castle at the southernmost island, and the map had

three towns on its middle islands: Futanari, Momiji, and Hotaru. The last of these towns was depicted as a major city, while the first was marked as a village.

Since we had a boat which covered us in intense color and shielded us from the effects of the Void, we traveled mainly by sea. It was slow, but we worked together with the crude oars I had made. Lilith wasn't very good at paddling and we wound up steering our raft left or right, so we had her fish instead. It turned out Nephilim were immune to the Void, so she was able to dive in, much like a cat, and grab fish from the water and swim back to the raft. It took awhile to get there, but we made it to Belial's Castle. It was a huge complex of white marble brick, with a back garden and everything, but there was an enormous gate blocking the entrance. The gate had an elaborate design on it, which looked vaguely like a sun, and a twisting root growing upward, as best as I could describe this. An alchemic design, I noticed. I explained to the others that this was a symbol of the physical world and humanity, and Belial putting this on his castle meant he was trying to make a pocket universe. “Let's go back,” I told the others, “Ambrosia needs to complete her training.” Ambrosia looked confused, “Huh? I do?!?” I nodded, “You have the Oracles for eight trigram Crests,” I showed her, grabbing her hand to show the design. I continued, “But look at the center! The Tao itself is not awakened! You can't really be the Oracle of Tao, if you have no Tao, can you?”

We headed back north, stopping only in one area, called the Tower of Sorrow. There, Zoe managed to find a sword called the Sword of Sorrow, which the people in the tower told her she was destined to have, even though we sorta kinda made the decision to go to this tower in the first place. The sword couldn't be used, though because there was some chain coiled all around the sheath. “You have to prove yourselves worthy,” the lady in the tower explained, “go and kill 13 Grey Wolves, collect their hearts and place them on the Sword.” Ambrosia shook her head, “No time for that sort of thing. We'll do it later.”

And so we headed up to the Void Wastes. If the Realm of Void was grey, flat, expansive, and depressing, the Void Wastes made all of that look positively vibrant. The sparse greyish grass that mixed with clay and withered trees gave way to dry cracked desert wastes for miles. We continued walking but everything looked the same in every direction. It was covered in a thick mist that masked the land in such a degree that the sun itself could not be seen, nor did water cast a reflection, nor could anything else be noticed beyond an acre of land. I worried that our bodies would cease to exist long before we reached our destination, but thankfully the Sword of Sorrow protected us from the Void, as the woman in the tower mentioned it would. We only had to worry about the Void Wastes completely obscuring the mountain that was supposed to be in the center with thick fog, causing us to walk in and out a few times without finding it. And we had to worry about hunger, since the supplies we had brought had been erased. We also had to worry about demons, Shadows, and greater ghouls, the last of which tossed fire spells at us and just kept coming back. And we had to avoid Grey Wolves for now, since we had nothing that seemed to hurt them. They were creepy anyway, as contrary to the name, they weren't just a different fur color, they were extremely grey even their eyes, and they were able to shrug off even Azrael's piercing spells with their solid bodies. Somehow or other, we managed to survive, and we made our way to the Mountain of Fate.

CHAPTER 30

In which Ambrosia faces her self. And loses. Or wins?

AMBROSIA

I climbed the Mountain of Fate, as the locals called it. We had ignored most of the towns on our way here, so we were just skipping straight to our main quest. I'm sure they weren't worth exploring anyway?

The Mountain of Fate was a much easier climb than Tsukuyomi Mountain back home. It seemed like along of people must have used it, because aside from switchbacks, it was a fairly smooth path. I made it past the merchant at the base selling arrows, past the highest tree which looked like it was struggling due to the low atmosphere, past a rocky

and windy section, and managed to make it to the top. We ate and drank what we could find, after wandering for awhile out in the Void Wastes, and looking kinda skinny.

The locals of the Temple of Sorrow had talked about this mountain. They had said, “The nearby area has a vast desert in the Void. You won't be able to make it out alive. But on the off-chance you do, nearby that is the Mountain of Fate. You, uhhh, don't want to go up this mountain. People I've talked to have tried to climb it, but they never came back the same way.” I asked him, “You mean, they got injured on the mountain? They broke their legs, or something?” He shook his head, “Not from my experience. In fact, to check it out, one of our people sent spies to follow them up the mountain. They made it nearly to the top unchanged. Then the people came down, and they were crazy. The spies themselves tried reaching the top, and they too had to be treated.” I had made it past the Void Wastes, I had made it nearly to the top. What was waiting for me up here? I told the others to stop short of the peak. Whatever happened, I didn't want them going mad too.

EVIL AMBROSIA

Hi there. My reputation is something I live with all of the time. I mean, everyone calls me Evil Ambrosia, and I got Thanatos's help to actually change my face so I didn't look exactly like her. I was given a different outfit, hair style and color, and so on. In actual fact, I have the same ponytail as her, the same clothing, the same abilities, the same everything. I have a bit more knowledge of my feelings and subconscious than her but otherwise, yeah, identical twins!

I'm not evil, by the way. I'm called this, because I remind her of “evil,” I show her deepest desires. To superego-driven Ambrosia, I seem evil though. She is impulsive, surprisingly so. But not where it counts. She hasn't really acted on her desires towards him, and that is why he left, I'm certain of it.

I traveled this whole way with her, since I am inside of her. Nevras breaking up is really breaking her up. And yet, this mountain is a test. In order to receive the Oracle of Tao's true power, she needs to face me. Others made it up the mountain. But none of them were Oracle, so when they saw their other selves, they cracked up. They couldn't face what was in the mirror.

Ambrosia took the last step up the mountain, and paced around. This mountain had a way of gradually forcing people to deal with their own angst. If she tried to leave before she did, she would find the way down blocked by a barrier. She had no choice but to deal with her own stuff. And deal she did, no sooner did she stop pacing than she started whining. She cried, “Love isn't everything, but I screwed it up. At this point in my quest, I could have been standing by Nevras's side watching over this beautiful mountain as I finish my training. Instead, I do it alone. All the things they told me about love in stories aren't true. All of it! They say love changes him, but he never changed, he was always lacking initiative.” Oh c'mon, don't make this about him. You were the one who could have asked.

She continued her monologue, “And he was always so wishy-washy, but he was also so gentle...” I blushed, as I thought about the things I liked about him. I don't like rough men. He was so gentle and kind, even when he saw me. He accepted me as another Ambrosia, not the evil one. And he was soooo sexy in that dress. She said, “If I could have him back, I wouldn't change a thing. They say sex solves problems, I wouldn't know, but somehow, I doubt this thing has a quick fix. They say the guy will always do the work in stories, but that certainly wasn't true. If only I'd known, I'd have tried harder to win his heart.” I would have liked him to initiate sex with me, but I'd have asked too if I knew letting *her* run things would make us end up here. If I went back in time, the first thing I'd do is tell her to go back and get her man. But we're stuck in this Realm of Void until we defeat Belial.

She finished, “They say that you just sorta know if he's the one. But if that were so, why'd it not work? They say you should change to make him yours in stories, but what about being yourself? They say playing hard to get works, but I know he wasn't the type to pursue. And they say love works whether you're a beggar or a king! Whoever, **they** are, I'll kill them! In the end, the only truth is, even if I love, there's no promise of love in return.” I wanted to put my hand on her shoulder. I felt for my other half, really I did. But

she hated me. She saw me as a trickster, that I was only here to cause her harm. I needed to approach her slowly and not freak her out. Even if it meant acting like the evil person she thought I was.

In a slightly mocking tone, I said, "Ambrosia, cheer up. You've still got me." And no, I cannot control how my voice sounds. I wish I could sound like a normal girl and not like some kind of demon. She shook her head in disgust. She said, "What do **you** want?!?" Then she looked at my outfit. Normally, when I appeared to her, I was in my long dress, my tiara, and everything else. This outfit was designed to remind her of her ambition to be queen alongside Nevras. It usually just made her angry. But today, I wore nothing by deep blue boots of a similar cut to hers, a plain cotton brassiere of the same color, and a matching bike shorts. She asked, "And where are your clothes?" I guess I was projecting a desire to go after Nevras. All I know is my breasts were bigger than hers.

I chuckled at her behavior, "Sweet likable Ambrosia, acting worse than me. Now this is refreshing!" She growled at me, "Shut up!You don't know what you're messing with today!" Oh trust me, I know. I know exactly what you're feeling. You can't see me most days, but I can see you. I was quick to correct her, "Are you kidding? I feel as much pain as you in my heart. And I have most of your anger to start with! So suck it, you tramp!" I can't believe I said that. Not while I was looking like this. She sighed, "You know, right about now, there's nothing to hold me back from fighting."

She pulled out her fishing rod and came for me. I decided now was the time to stop pretending, so I dropped my disguise. Seeing a mirror image of herself but for minor differences in shade managed to completely rattle her nerves. She paused mid-swing. I took advantage of this gap to pull out my own weapon. I grabbed my fishing pole and caught her arm with the hook. She caught her hook in my face. "Ow, ow, owwww! Hey, let's not use the fishing hooks, Ambrosia," I said. We agreed to a temporary truce while the two of us unhooked from each other's bodies. She said, "Let's try this again." This time, we tried in earnest using our Oracle powers. Our Trigram abilities had been lost along the way of gaining Crests, and Predict was a skill we barely knew how to use, but we used it plenty now. I could see that she was going to use Lilith's Crest, so I stepped through the motions of Alexander's Crest, snuffing the darkness in light. She obviously knew I was planning Chronos next, because she countered with Aiken, closing her body up from attack while I stopped her body in time. Great, I couldn't even hurt her while she was otherwise open to attack. She used Michael's martial form to pull off a long string of physical attacks against me, but I used Apollo's defensive form to pull away from each of them and counter. She looked pretty beat up, so I paused a bit. I didn't want to hurt her, but this was part of her test. Neither of us dared use Thanatos, because this battle wasn't to the death. I could see a future where she used Four Gods, so I went into the steps of my Apollo Crest, crossing my arms against her move. But to my surprise, she paused. She waited. And waited. Then just as I dropped my guard, she whipped through the movements of the Four Gods form, catching me off guard. She swept through to the next form, trapping me in time using Chronos. Then I got hit a couple more times with her other stuff. By the end of it, I looked more beaten up than her. As the Crests could also be used as martial arts, we switched to this under mutual agreement. I blocked her moves, sweeping my fists in circular motions, then pushed her kicks away with my other hand. We were reading moves and our body went with the flow, as we dodged each other's attacks. I went behind her, only for her to sidestep and pull me to the ground.

I punched toward her head, but she moved through the entire motions of *tai chi chuan*, sweeping my attacks aside and responding with powerful attacks of her own. We were no longer mirroring each other. She had won. And yet, there was a sadness in her victory. Living beings in the New Earth do not have shadows. But I was about to give her one. I moved towards her and touched her cheek. "I will always be with you, just ask for my help," I told her. Suddenly, all of our wounds disappeared, for this battle had not and could not exist. We were the same person, I had simply hidden that fact from her all this time. She said, "I feel different now. It still hurts, but I don't feel as alone anymore." Our body had all eight Crests lit, plus the Tao in the center was finally active. I could feel its power. "Try it out!" I told her. Moving through the forms, she completed all 28 forms of the Yang Style, and summoned me from her shadow. Then she used Roll Back Push in

one direction to send a ball of Yin Yang energy at a nearby tree. I could hear her having a sort of psychic conversation with me, as I was part of her, and vice versa. Reality grayed out to just the tree and her, and I could feel something strange. It was like there was a sort of Resonance between her and the tree, as if they were at war with each other over who would exert will over the other. Thankfully, even as depressed as she was, she still had more of a sense of self than a tree, but I worried about strong-willed creatures. Her power hit the tree, and it imploded under its own pressure. After this, one would think that this was the end of it, but the Tao apparently enforced balance in the universe. There was a sort of palpable feedback, as she felt some of the pain she'd just inflicted on the plant. Taking a cue from her, I used Chronos to rewind everything that happened to the plant. We headed down the mountain.

AMBROSIA

Joining the others, I felt strangely better. Well, I still hated the way things turned out with Nevras, and it would probably put me in a mood for the entire battle against Belial. And yet, now I knew that Evil Ambrosia wasn't really evil at all, she was the part of me that wanted to do things I was too reluctant to do. It was almost like I'd gained a cute older sister who knew more about me than I understood.

The others talked about what to do next, but I couldn't really concentrate. I was too busy chatting with myself in a long conversation, until at last Elias asked, “Ambrosia, what do you think?” About what? I pretended I knew exactly what he was talking about and nodded, “Of course. Let's do that.” They totally were fooled by this.

ELIAS

Nobody was fooled by this. Noticing that she wasn't paying attention, I talked about how rabbits were really just furry dinosaurs, and asked her what she thought about this. Zoe and the rest raised an eyebrow. We could tell this was affecting her.

While we could have explored the Realm of Void further to make sure there weren't any important items that could be used to defeat Belial more easily, I could read her mood. We were going to skip as much as possible, and head straight to Belial's castle. We ran into a number of creatures on the way down, but Ambrosia dispatched them easily with her new ability. She seemed to be focusing more on something in her own head than the world around her. She was distracted, and each time she used her powers against something, she seemed to grow more depressed. I wouldn't categorize this change as evil, though. I was more like a sort of power that amplified emotions she couldn't handle right now. I cannot imagine what she must be feeling.

A person in a hood approached us as we made it to the base of the mountain. The voice was definitely female, though their face wasn't clear. She seemed to be walking funny, almost like her lower body was a sealskin, but I couldn't tell from the long robe.

“Before you head down the mountain,” she said, “there's something you should have.” Ambrosia asked, “What's this?” It looked like a Transport Coin. These were very rare. “It's a Transport Coin,” the girl said, “It's very hard to make, but we gathered the dimensional energy, and I was sent back in time to meet you. This coin can summon transportation from the other world, including that huge dragon of yours.” Ambrosia looked shocked, “How do you know about Bahamut? Just who are you?” She explained, “I am a follower of Yazim Jianne, the dread sorcerer who summoned Belial. He wanted to to tell you that he is sorry for his actions, and he is waiting for you near his wife's tomb.” While I had only heard of Yazim Jianne from Delphi, Ambrosia looked shaken, like she knew the man personally. Where had she met him?

A gift was a gift, though. We made it down the mountain, and tossed the Transport Coin into the air. When it landed back into my hand, a portal opened up, and Bahamut came through. We rode on its back, enjoying the grey lifeless scenery of the Realm of Void at high speed. We made it once again to the door, and this time Ambrosia wasted no time bashing down the door with her powers.

AMBROSIA

The inside of the castle of Belial was filled with rooms covered with all sorts of puzzles. But I wasn't in the mood, so I blew up the locked door to the later sections. I

made it to a room where our old friends, Sera and Phim, were standing guarding the way. I had no time for this crap either. We ignored those two trying to talk, and just went all out at full strength until they were a red stain on the floor. I could feel everything, as part of the Tao Crest, so the more I killed the crummier I felt. I was covered in guilt and I was in actual pain, but I had no choice. I needed to finish Belial off.

I entered a long corridor. I walked along for roughly a mile, yet I appeared no closer to either the beginning nor end of the corridor. I had the others try to burst through the wall, but after making a hole on the side, I glanced over. There was another me in a parallel room, looking into a hole at another me at another me... Disturbed, I reversed the hole, so I wouldn't get creeped out by infinite versions of myself.

We were getting nowhere, though. I was trapped. I couldn't move forward, and I couldn't go back, and I couldn't get out except maybe by dying. And with my luck, I'd even wind up as a ghost stuck in this very hall. I kept walking. I had gone maybe five or ten miles. The hall had carved stone walls, a dresser mirror, a table, and some old lights staggered every few feet. Every now and then, a gargoyle statue or a large bowl of trinkets showed up. I could gauge roughly a length of about 150 yards. It was impressive, but I'd seen the same stuff over and over again. My legs gave out. "I feel like I've been walking forever," I said, "sorry, but I just need to rest here." I took a nap for a few hours. "I'm fine now," I said. I walked yet some more. Finally, I said, "No good... It's hopeless. I keep walking forever, and it just keeps going on and on..." My eyes blinked, and suddenly, I noticed that much of the furniture was missing, leaving the hall now with just bare stone walls. Maybe I had just imagined it anyway. "Will I ever return from this quest? Will I ever see my family again?" I had just learned who my mother was, and who my real father was. And now would I be able to visit them? **You can't**, a voice echoed in my head. "I need to keep going," I said, "but..." **It's hopeless**, a voice echoed in my head. I was soooo hungry and sooooooooooooo thirsty. "If I don't have something to eat or drink soon, I'll die..." The voice called to me, **You never existed**.

Could that really be true? Has all this journey been the final hallucination of a dying person? Or did I die some time during my beggar years? The voice repeated, **You never existed**. That's right. I never existed to start with. My life makes no sense!

I glanced at the reflection of myself inside this warped space. All of a sudden, the face faded away. Then, like a giant mirror shattering, all that I was fragmented. I faded away too. There was no body, no self, no me at all. "I should just fade into nothing and disappear," nobody said. I heard voices call out to me. "Ambrosia!" Elias said. "Ambrosia!" Aqorm said. "Ambrosia!" the others said. "Guys..." The voice repeated, **You never existed.** "No, it can't be real," this person who was me said, "I never was there to meet them, in the first place. I'm just a character in a book." A fierce voice called, "Ambrosia, you cut that out! All of us are waiting!" That must be Aqorm. A scholarly voice called after her, "Ambrosia, don't leave us. We care about you..." Elias, I guess. "I'm sorry guys, thanks. But I don't exist. I'm not sure about you either." Everything around faded into blackness as the voices faded away. Then there was nothing. But wait... a heartbeat. It was slow, but definitely there. I heard a heartbeat. Nothing should exist, if I didn't exist. But there was definitely one there. Then, I heard a voice. *Remember, in deepest darkness shines the light.* God's voice? I heard those voices of nagging doubts again, yet I noticed... they were coming from somewhere. They weren't my own. Straining my senses, I opened my eyes. I realized that I *had* eyes. I was sitting in a room with the others. I said, "Everyone, I love you! Thank you for believing in me!" as I gave everyone nearby a group hug. It felt kinda nice...

ELIAS

Ambrosia appeared to have been under a sort of tailor-made trap specifically suited for her. As soon as she entered the hallway, her understanding of reality became distorted. She went comatose, and began using her Crests, waving her arms about. I had originally planned to just let her use her Crests to break the effect, but when I saw her using her Aiken Crest to become more insubstantial, we had to do something. It was likely this trap would trigger each time she entered, and she would be unable to remember anything

about this being familiar. The exact same event could repeat, and none of us would even know it. It was okay now, though. We were safe.

The room was a large square with not too much furniture, but Belial was in his urn, and the lid was loosening. We stood nearby, ready for anything. Only, we weren't. The urn suddenly burst, and out came something vaguely resembling an enormous armored serpent with arms, huge teeth, and horns. Regular attacks and even spells seemed to bounce off its flesh. The dagger Ambrosia held didn't seem to be reacting like it would against an Elder Formless. This battle would be tough.

AMBROSIA

Before any fighting took place, I needed answers. "Just who are you? And how long have you been messing with my mind?" He answered, "I AM THE BEAST FROM THE JAR, BELIAL. AS FOR HOW LONG I HAVE BEEN MESSING WITH YOU... ACTUALLY, I MOSTLY JUST FOUND OUT ABOUT YOU WHEN YOU ENTERED MY HALLWAY. I WOULD HAVE SUCCEEDED IN STEALING YOUR POWER JUST THEN, IF NOT FOR YOUR FRIENDS. SO FRAGILE IS THE POWER OF HUMANITY. THEY RELY ON EACH OTHER FOR ALL. DESTROYING THEM IS A SIMPLE MATTER OF BREAKING ONE LINK ON THE CHAIN BETWEEN PEOPLE. OBSERVE!" So saying, he held his clawed hand high in the air, calling forth a ball of energy. We managed to dodge out of the way, but the ball left a crater in the ground. No helping it, I guess, we'd have to fight.

Zoe tried to go Sage form. But she had yet to really master the technique. She'd used it once or twice, but there was still a risk of doing it wrong. Like today. When she tried it, she drew in too much energy, and went all stone toad on us. Azrael, as part of her spell research, and possibly because she care deeply for Zoe, had conducted a study during one of our trips into Kushiyama. Along with other things, she must have come up with a treatment for whatever caused that condition, because after a few minutes, Zoe was back to normal. Only, she had not one but two mutations to her lungs. She was gasping for air, and in poor condition to fight. Azrael couldn't do much now either, since most of her effort for the time being was normalizing her beloved. Aqorm couldn't use geomancy here, as this castle was virtually devoid of land mana, so she had to rely on her blades. She was tough, but Belial was tougher. Belial had skin that needed a lot more force in order to penetrate than she was currently capable of. Elias had some use, but although Belial as a demon was weak to holy attacks, most of his mystic power was instead used keeping everyone healthy. Belial had a pretty terrible bite, he clawed at us, he used elemental magic, and darkness-based magic, and every now and then, for good measure, he whipped his tail around, smashing all of us with a lot of force. Michael and Lilith were doing all the work. Lilith was whacking him with her stone, Michael was using Script to summon various projectiles made from holy energy to toss at her. "***Holy Arrows, Quantity - 30, Radius - One Target***," Michael said. Lilith complained, "This is too hard. Why is it just us?" Michael responded, "Patience, demon girl. Sooner or later, this demon will fall."

Nobody else could fight this creature. It was up to me. I had to do it alone. While I could bash this demon around with Alexander's holy energy, I was convinced that the best way to hurt him was to use my new Tao ability. Because, you know, there isn't a proper time or place to use abilities, you should just use the strongest one without thinking about the drawbacks.

I actually knew how the Tao worked. But I couldn't help myself. The same traits that were good about the Tao in battle also were drawbacks. Right now when I felt powerless to stop Nevras, that feeling of power was addictive. Likewise, I knew that the Resonance ability of the Tao, which made you connect on a spiritual level with your enemy was not only its greatest strength but also its biggest weakness. When you used the Tao, the boundary between you and the target of your attack faded away. You were them, and they were you. There was no difference, you were fighting yourself. A well adjusted person would feel for their enemies, and feel normal regret, yet understand that this was part of battle, and in the long-term, things had to be done. They would have mastered themselves, and be able to face themselves without being defeated. It is very confusing to explain, but the point is, the more emotionally healthy I was, the stronger the Resonance, and the more devastating the attack was. I was not emotionally healthy right now, though. Not in the least. I was upset about Nevras leaving, I was distracted, and I

was addicted to this. I was willing to use it when other abilities would do the same thing at a slower rate, but with far less risk. Let's see, this move went Roll Back Push...

BOOK I ENDING

In which all things come to an end.

AZRAEL

I had been healing Zoe when I looked up. Ambrosia had been used her new move like crazy lately, and it looked like she was getting ready to do so again. I had been wondering if there was some kind of drawback to it, because most of her other moves were not nearly as powerful as this one, almost like comparing a grenade to a nuke. Oh yeah, I knew about nuclear weapons. I also knew the true reason why technology went away, and would not likely come back either.

Long ago, when humans discovered fire, there was a paradigm shift. You see, runes are code. They are a type of energy that defines reality, just as Original Intent defines form and function, and used to be called “atoms.” Few people know that word anymore, and it's a good thing, as through the study of atoms came the atomic bomb and the problems of nuclear energy pollution. Cosmic energy uses energy along the same principles, but it has none of the risk of fallout. Around the time of the invention of fire was when humans understood how to use runes, and this continued until about the Industrial Revolution. After that time, there was no longer any more talk about “superstitious” things like magic or faith, and people only talked about science or technology in terms of making new things. Really, you can't put together a new device without piecing together millions and millions of these “atoms” and running the device requires energy. What do you think that comes from? They were hiding from themselves the existence of runes, and would have continued to do so if not for encountering elves and learning about mystic power.

It is time to tell you of Earth's true history. You see, at the time of Joseph in Egypt around 2000 BC, there were 7 years of famine. This is consistent with either a volcanic explosion or a nuclear winter. Also circa 2000 BC, there was an account of a weapon called the **Brahmastra** in Hindu texts with risk of hair loss and poisoning of food and water. It was a nuclear bomb in a time before complex technology. For at the time, people did not require technology, they used magic. This is why their architecture appears so simple but is also so heavy as to be suggested done by aliens. This is why occasionally archaeology will turn up strange objects that appear to be out of time. Whenever things get to a point of absolute destruction, they also renew themselves or start over.

Before magic, there was another system called hierophany. The pyramids operate such a system, and are far older than history books claim. The Great Pyramid and the positioning of the pyramids correspond with the constellation of Orion. This alignment would have only occurred around 10500 BC. The Sphinx, too, aligns to the the constellation of Leo in the same year, 10500 BC. History is mostly cyclical, not linear.

In fact, a video game released in 1996 called *Treasure of the Rudras* carefully mapped human history to a 4000 year cycle of growth, destruction, historical suppression, and regeneration. And it was mentioned again, when the documentary known as *Crystalis* depicted the End Day as October 1, 1997. These events depict real history in this world.

This cycle of destruction and renewal continued with minor changes several times, until Jesus came. Jesus broke the cycle and humanity overall turned aside from constant war and destruction, at least until this time Earth destroyed for a different reason thousands of years later, because of the demon Belial. The cycle of history changed, and fate was averted. The Brahmastra is now common knowledge, a powerful ritual that requires at least two people to unlock. But unlike before, the Gayatri sutra is also known, basically the same sutra as the other but with the syllables inverted. These are patterns of thought called the Absolute. The Gayatri is Absolute Yang, an ability of Renewal capable of making lifeless planets green and abolishing toxicity; the Brahmastra is Absolute Yin, an ability of Destruction. The people at the time believed them technology, and called them terraforming and nuclear weapons. But they are not. They saw only the solid form,

not the reality. This was the power of the mind, to create or destroy. This was the power of Tao.

Ambrosia's Tao ability took from the other eight Crests, right? So there had to be some kind of drawback. I watched as she did this. I watched the air turn subtly grow dimmer in a radius around herself and Belial. Through careful observation of magic, I was able to analyze what everyone missed, how exactly this effect worked. It linked Ambrosia to her target, giving her a sort of feedback. Ideally, I'm sure it drained power from the target, feeding it back to her as extra power, and rolling it back at them. To the average observer, it looked like she just launched a rotating white and black ball of energy at a single target, but from my careful observation I concluded they were both *inside* a rotating ball. The constant feedback appeared to be the key to this technique. I watched it, all of it, just as it failed. What was normally supposed to happen was as it rotated, the ball was supposed to narrow until it matched the size of the target, damaging or destroying them depending on how effective it was. But that's not what happened. I saw the ball instead waver, and swirl back a bit, and Ambrosia collapsed. Even before I checked her pulse, I knew she was dead, and this would not be an easy revival.

Revival mainly revives deaths that can be medically explained. But revival from Yin Yang feedback misfire... I'm not even sure I could come up with a spell to reverse that.

After that, everything went wrong. It started with the weak sections of the wall. They were loose, and with all the fighting going on, it was understandable that some damage might result. But I knew better. Because I had seen everything when I rang my Exorcist Bell. Zoe also showed a knowing look, she also know who Ambrosia was. It must have been when they teleported together, that sort of thing does share memories, even ones you didn't know you had. Then, the floor shook. Tiny cracks formed in the walls, floor, and ceiling. These cracks became fissures, and these fissures became holes. Then something happened that most people had never seen. The holes themselves began to develop cracks until the holes had holes. We were standing in an empty room. No, that's not right. We were standing in a room filled with emptiness. The physical dimensions of the place were likely the same, but the walls overlapped with outer space and the void. The stars could be seen, but they were burning out, one by one.

Aqorm asked, “Why? Why are you doing this? Everyone's disappearing because of what you've done!” Belial scoffed, “ME? YOU THINK I DID THIS? LISTEN, AMBROSIA ISN'T DEAD. IN FACT, SHE'S THE ONLY ONE OF US WHO ACTUALLY EXISTS... IF SHE'S KNOCKED OUT LIKE THIS, THE UNIVERSE STARTS TO CRUMBLE. ALL OF US WILL DIE, BECAUSE YOU ATTACKED ME. MY PLAN WOULD HAVE DESTROYED MANY, BUT ULTIMATELY IT MIGHT HAVE RESULTED IN A REAL WORLD. NOW YOU'VE RUINED EVERYTHING!” The demon was right. God had chosen her for a specific reason, and it had nothing to do with her being Oracle. She was already special.

Aqorm asked, “What's he talking about?” I explained to Elias, hoping he would explain to her, “Ambrosia is... a cosmic keystone. If she goes, everything goes.” The dawning revelation made everyone freeze in shock. My last thoughts before all of us fade into nothing were to remember what I had seen...

AMBROSIA

It is as he said, despite the fact that my body should have died, I was only in a little coma. I heard everything. Then, I remembered everything. This was wrong. I wasn't supposed to remember this...

Book II
Sidequests

CHAPTER 1

In which God resets everything, because the author wrote themselves into a corner.

GOD

Reset. Hmmm, nothing's happening. I'll need to do a hard reboot. I sat in a blank space looking at the Void all around me. I hope I don't have to work all the way back from the top. You know, calling for light, working six days to make the universe, repopulating the place, then moving forward until the Oracle of Tao. It wasn't so bad this last time, but everyone found out about this, so they got infected too. There's more to this space than your puny human brains can understand, so I'm simply translating it into effective terms. This is my Control Panel.

Load *,8,1. Ah good, the original copy still runs from the disc. I don't have to rebuild the engine itself. Okay, let's see here, list of options... Alright, we have a Last Good file on this one. It's pretty old though. I hope it hasn't gotten corrupted. ***Run Last Good Version.*** Uh oh. Everything looks intact, but Ambrosia and that other one are misplaced. Ah, there she is. ***Set Location - IP Address 256.108.64.08***

AMBROSIA

Where am I? This town... It looks like Opening. But... there's no one here. I wander about this land and suddenly understand that there is no “was” or “will be.” There is only a sense of “is.” This place is the present only. I'll probably screw up and use words referring to the past anyway, because I'm human and pretty fallible. I walk through this town all the way out the entrance, but find myself unable to do so. It isn't that I'm blocked by a wall. I move out of the town, but the entire space of this area appears to be a small looped area. I walk out of town and after a while, find myself walking back into town from the opposite direction. So then I try walking left or right, and find myself moving alongside an infinite number of Opening towns. I decide to do an experiment. I have some bread for some reason and I lay it down on a tree stump near where my bed is in town, not remembering at this point how I got it.

Got. Past tense. An image of the past flashes in front of me, I remember some things. Time is eternal here, but I remember how old I am, my name, and my friends. Not much else about this place is clear. My name is Ambrosia, I have friends named Aqorm, Elias, Azrael, Zoe, Lilith, and Michael... I feel like I am missing a friend, one who didn't travel with me recently. I was fighting... something, but none of that matters now. I return to the town from outside the town. This is not a false town. It is simply vacant, from what I can see. I walk outside, moving away from town however I can. Nothing happens to this bread, so I bite it, and the bread is in the same state of digestion in all towns. I walk north in this town. If it really is my town, there ought to be ghosts in the graveyard, and that weird lady who gives away Jars of Human Tears. She is not here. There is no time, after all, so I suppose this old woman cannot be old, and there is no death here, only emptiness. But near the grave, I do see someone.

YAZIM JIANNE

I know this town. This is town where I buried her. Oh yes, I remember who I am. I remember everything because my past is through her. I am Yazim Jianne, and I know why I am here. I came here when Belial tried to destroy me, after my portal went wrong. But that's not why I'm here.

I am here, alone, because things went wrong. I am here, because for me, time has stopped. I am here because I am eternally trapped within my own regret, and this place is a place of the present. This is a place to get away from my past. But even here, I cannot leave behind my past. The memories of her define me. I read the gravestone again, having not needed to sleep or eat since I got here. «Here lies Sarai Jianne, beloved of Yazim Jianne (7045-7073 AD)» it reads. She died because I was caught off-guard. I tried to make a light source, and she wound up in the wrong place. She was electrocuted, dying in an attempt to save me.

Memories come rushing in. I see the event in every gory detail. It starts with me being

a sorcerer dedicated to helping others. I make inventions. Some of them are mad, yet I don't care what other people think. I was in love then, with a beautiful wife. She even helped test my creations, to the point where she immune to most poisons! She was a real treasure to me. However... I see us now in an underground laboratory. Using crystal seeding, I trap luminescence in the form of electrical energy, then proceed to grow peridot crystals around the energy, and I triumphantly laugh, “Mwahaha!!! My Glow Crystals are perfect!” That's right, I was the inventor of the Glow Orb. The Glow Crystals though, had a flaw in their design. My wife, having tested all my theories personally, immediately understands this. She sees what I can't see. “Now to examine more closely...” I say, as I begin to approach them at a distance where the radiation would produce toxic effects, and I would be at risk of electrocution due to the peridot crystals having little insulation due to their high iron content. “No! You mustn't!” she cries, rushing forward and pushing me out of the way. She trips, and falls right in the space where several crystals met. I watch, again and again, as the trauma of what happened replays in my head. Her long blue-hair and tall delicate body started to flex in response to the charge. Her skin becomes covered in burns. Gradually, her body writhes and twists in response. Then her own muscles try to throw her across the room, but she instead hits another Glow Crystal. There is nowhere to go. She receives charge after charge of electricity until the current stopped her heart. She is dead, eternally, in my memories.

Next, I see myself succeeding in correcting the original problem of the Glow Crystals, distributing the design safely among the public. I win acclaim but it is meaningless now. I disappear from public view, and begin working in more and more dangerous alchemy, sorcery, and eventually I begin to research forbidden techniques. Chimeric genetics, demon summoning, and experiments attempting to make a surrogate soul. I see my deal with Belial, and I see now his obvious lies for what they are. I finally look up from the gravestone and stop reading the inscription. I see another girl with blue hair looking up at me. It was her.

AMBROSIA

That man... I have seen him somewhere before... but where? He glares at me, as if he knew about me more than I knew him. “It's you...” I say, before asking, “who are you again?” He presses his palm to his face, “Yazim Jianne! My name is Yazim Jianne! I'm the evil sorcerer that helped the demon Belial and got us in this mess!” It is rare to hear a person honestly declare himself evil. People normally believe themselves good, making excuses for their behavior. This Yazim Jianne... he was familiar... wait, Belial? Suddenly memories come rushing into my mind. I remember my quest. I remember... this dude. Yazim Jianne, was it? I remember the Oracle Crests, which started to glow on my hand. Right, I have spiritual powers, don't I? “Why are you here?” I ask him.

He explains, “I was duped. The demon I worked with convinced me that he would help me bring back my wife. So I helped him get released. But as soon as he got the chance, he tried to destroy me.” He recounts how his wife died, how he gathered the keys to Belial's urn, and how he tried to use a Gate to get away but was instead trapped here. It was such a tragic story, so I started crying.

“So we can get out, right?” I ask, “you can just throw up a Gate inside here and get us out, right?” He shook his head, “No. This is not Opening. This is the Eternal Town. Runes can work here, but...” He calls a Gate. “Look at the other side, if you will,” he says, pointing to the inside of the Gate. Gates, when open are like windows, able to show the area on the other side. And what I can see is... well, the town we're in.

“You see?” he says, “we aren't in another place or another dimension. We're beyond everything. Nowhere. Everywhere. Gates work by traveling dimensions and physical space. You can go anywhere in the universe, parallel universes, and even travel in time.”

I am confused, “But wait, if the Gate can go anywhere and anywhen(?) then why can't we leave this place?” Yazim Jianne sighs, “You don't understand magical theory, do you?” I shake my head, so he explains, “All runes come from energy flowing from sources. There are natural sources, like the sun, the air, moisture, and the earth below your feet. There are arcane and divine sources, from old runes or from God or immortals. So, all of this energy comes from existing phenomena in the universe, wonder-workers

and sorcerers simply pull it to use for their purposes. So, where do you think the time/space magic comes from?" I make a wild guess, "So you're saying this Eternal Town is where time and space collects? And the reason we can't leave through a Gate is because we're *inside* a Gate?" Yazim Jianne looks impressed, "After I first met you, I sent scouts to study you. But they came back with the impression you were very naive. It looks like you have good instincts though. Yes, that is the general idea. I got trapped in this dimension by casting a Gate which was forcibly closed on both sides by Hellfire. Wait, hold on..." A thought occurs to him, "Just **how** did you get here? The Law of Conservation of Will states that the amount of magical versatility that a person could have is inversely proportional to its base power; that is, a power such as the Oracle's should leave you with only those techniques, you shouldn't be able to make a Gate." Because I want to understand this as well, I explain what I remember of my past. I tell how God had basically promised to Reset things if my adventure went wrong, and how I learned too much about my past (although now I can't recall what I just learned) and so the Reset didn't work properly. Yazim Jianne suddenly stops me, "Wait, so you say God used some kind of technique that delivers you back to the last save point, and doesn't use the runes of the Gate? Maybe we can get out, after all!" I shake my head, "But the last place I saved was inside the Realm of Void." He smiled, "No, we probably can't Reset anyway, since it's something governed by God. However, I may have an idea. First, tell me about all of the abilities granted to you by the Oracles." I explain in detail everything I was able to do, taking care not to skip anything. "天空寫作 ," he says, causing his index finger to be coated with blue fire, which he uses to jot down letters, numbers, and other symbols in midair. "Let's see," he says, in a way that reminded me of when Elias geeks out on research, "if I carry the one here, and move that there... Yes, this might work! Okay, Ambrosia, was it? I'm going to need you to use all of your powers at once. This won't be easy, and might hurt... a lot, actually, but you should should be able to warp time and space enough that we'll be able to leave. You'll need to hold each Crest in place while you do the next. Now, you'll need to do it in this order..." He shows me how to effectively string together techniques. Because our circumstances were different, a completely different mix of techniques is needed. Yazim Jianne needs a portal to simply open it back to Opening, so I needed to activate his Crests in the following order: Chronos, Aiken, Tao. This will bolster the range of my powers, then open a portal to the Gate's original destination, using the Resonance of the Tao to maintain the portal until he crosses. I, on the other hand, cannot simply go back through a portal because it will either drop me off in the Realm of Void or separate me from my friends. I need to rewrite my reality, much like the Reset ability, only more so. I had to use all of my Crests, to transfer my future self to my past self. Before he enters though, he asks me, "How will I know you're from the right timeline, though?" She shows me a Transport Coin. "When I was heading down the Mountain of Fate, this girl who said she was your assistant handed me this. She said that she was from the future." He scowls as if to say that it is absurd.

As I watch Yazim Jianne disappear through the portal, I prepare for what I have to do. My new memories will be in my old body, which hadn't awakened the Tao yet, so I'd lose my new powers. And yet, I can't be stuck here. I work myself through the forms. All of them are necessary: Thanatos because I need to discard my current body, Apollo because it is the Crest of Life and I need to be reborn as a spirit, Alexander and Lilith to reinforce the Tao, Michael because it allows transference, Four Gods for balancing all of these energies together, Chronos to move through time, Aiken to move my spirit back to my body, and the Tao to unite my current spirit with my soul in the past. I finish the technique and I appeared on the New Earth just a few days ago. Yup, past tense all of a sudden. Well, longer, after you considered the Realm of Void's time distortion.

"What's that?" I asked. Nevras said, "Weren't you listening? We're heading to Hinata." It was the 10th day of the month of Dog. What they call December 10. I was back.

YAZIM JIANNE

I know this town. I was back in Opening. As an experiment, to make sure that I wasn't trapped, I left town heading south. I wound up near Shoten. I was indeed back in the real world. I found the Great Tree, Tsukuyomi Mountain, and Shoten nearby me. And yet, my

purpose in life was over. My mission for years had been an experiment to bring my beloved back. I'd even believed that a Fallen could help me. All that I could do now was maybe make more insane inventions like the self-grinding coffee machine (a device that could grind its own materials down so no one could make coffee), work on an online dating App, or do some more research on orgones.

Wilhelm Reich, centuries ago, believed that the entire world was powered by what we now know of as mystic power, a bluish energy that flowed through all things, usually in the form of an aura. However, Reich believed that this energy which he dubbed "orgones" was derived from sexual energy. He also believed that the reason the sky was blue was because of leftover orgones, flowing into the atmosphere from people having sex. The sky had been ruined from Belial's actions, and it was up to me personally to heal the world. I would achieve this by getting people to have as much sex as possible, and containing it in a device to later release into the atmosphere. The online dating App would help in this. Yes, this was a worthy goal. I would have to stay in Opening since it was conducive to my experiments, surely not because I wanted to mourn my wife.

Of the two of us, I had the easier time, I didn't have to time travel. Time travel is tricky, due to several factors. Normally, people think that the past is fixed, but not only does the future branch but the past does as well. For you see, time-travel is non-fatalistic. Seers divine most likely futures, based on decisions. In the absence of this, there are a large number of branches in both past and future, risking that anyone traveling in time alter a timeline that was not their own and return to a completely alien present. This means you can potentially change one timeline, but in order to ensure travel to the right present requires careful planning or dumb luck. This also means each trip into the past is unique and influenced by which past the person enters, so it is impossible to meet time traveling versions of yourself while time traveling. Since there are a number of pasts and presents, free will governs time travel, so a traveler cannot force future or past versions of themselves to act a certain way. If your past self dies your future self dies, although if a third party acts to save your life then it is saved (even if you previously died). It's a convoluted mess, but the simple explanation is that time travel can change events, but it is difficult to know which parallel timeline changed or how things changed.

As this was her first attempt traveling in time, besides all those Reset uses, she might be okay, but there was no way of knowing without investigating. But soon, I would know. And then, all would maybe be according to plan. Mwahahahaha...

CHAPTER 2

In which everyone has a second chance. Except Belial, he's a loser.

AMBROSIA

Yazim Jianne had warned me about alternate realities, so I checked around Hinata for anything that looked odd, and seeing nothing, I rejoined the group. I went to the temple again, checked in to the hotel again, and then headed to the spring again. This was the key point! This was what I needed to change.

I stripped off most of my clothes as before. I made certain all conditions were normal, and that things did happen like they were supposed to. Yazim Jianne warned me of the consequences of changing a parallel timeline too much. Satisfied that this was in fact the time and place I was supposed to be, I talked to Nevras.

We ducked down into the springs at about shoulder level to keep warm with the icy rain. "There's... there's supposed to be no mixed bathing!" Nevras protested. I responded, "Yes, but you went into the wrong side. This is the women's section." I said it with less honesty this time, having planned it this time.

Some time passed, in awkward silence. "The water is pretty nice," Nevras said. I had to basically follow a script thus far to what almost led to a kiss, yet not appear to be repeating myself as I said, "You know, soon we'll probably defeat Belial, and his people, what happens then?" Nevras asked me, "What do you mean?" I answered, "Well, after our quest, we might just split up and never travel together again. I want more time with you..." I leaned forward as if to kiss him. At that exact point, a bird was going to dive-

bomb us, ruining our romantic time. But I grabbed that bird in midair, shocking and impressing Nevras. “Look, you,” I said to the bird, “I like birds as much as the next gal, but I want to kiss this guy and I'm not cool with you trying to stop me.” Then I gave the bird an uppercut, knocking it out and sending it flying.

“Wait, you said you wanted to kiss me?” Nevras asked. Wasn't it obvious?

Trying again, we edged closer and closer, until our lips touched. For as second, they met, and then our lips moved with each other. A sort of hunger took over, and we had an urge to take each other's clothes off. But, well we'd already done that since it was a hot spring, and I was not ready to lose my virginity just yet. So we instead focused on kissing. We broke the kiss for a second. Nevras explained, “You know, out in Phoenix, we have a saying...” My curiosity showed, “Oh?” He told me, “Every attack must be retaliated with equal force.” And then, he started kissing me back softly yet passionately. As our lips and sometimes our tongues blended together, I muttered, “**Revenge**...”

NEVRAS

That was fun! After having a nice time in the hot spring, we made our way to the beach, and enjoyed swimming there as well. It had stopped raining, and we saw Aqorm there. The two of us swam around, while we watched Aqorm body-board along the coast.

As night came, we decided to chill out while the others hung out at the bar. We cuddled, and since Ambrosia was not yet up for sex, but we were too excited to just fall asleep, we asked the innkeeper, mostly using crude sign language since we couldn't understand each other, if he had a Crystal Mirror we could watch something on. We wound up watching some show called *Josh Kirby: Time Warrior*. It was a television series that was broken into six feature-length episodes of about an hour and a half or so, about a kid who was time-traveling in what appeared to be a flying van on a quest to recover components of a device that would stop an evil scientist. It had a nice plot twist near the end, but all the episodes were so terribly done in terms of costumes and special effects that we tried hard to ignore this. Bad claymation, “medieval” costumes which looked like tee-shirts were underneath, noticeable CG, and backgrounds that in some cases looked like a television display were all present in this show. We kissed again a fair amount, because this show was so cheesy that we'd start laughing if we didn't do something else.

We headed for the portal, when Ambrosia suddenly sidetracked us. “Hey,” she said, “we should train harder. I wouldn't want to be defeated by Belial, like last time, so we should maybe do some sidequests to increase our strength.” Did I hear her say, “Like last time”?

LILITH

There's something you should know about. I'm not exactly innocent of things in Hinata. Oh, I'm sure you've heard Elias or Aqorm talk about how wicked she was, stealing a kiss from me. Let's set the record straight.

I am a horny demon. In every sense of the word. Not only did I convince a girl to leave her boyfriend, which is bad enough, not only was I still actively wanting to sleep with her, but the moment she left, I went after someone else. After Aqorm left, Michael and I were alone at the bar. We had just gotten into an argument. I don't really remember about what, since it seems so silly now. I told him, “You take that back! How dare you tell me something like that!” This was following what he had just said, which was extremely insulting. Michael was drunk, and while he had managed to sober up just enough to not be slurring, snarled, “ I **won't**. I'll say it as many times as I need to!” Everyone in the bar rolled their eyes. Angels and demons getting into arguments was a cliche, even though they didn't meet often enough that people would make it one. I glared at him, face red with frustration, “The way you are... it really makes me...” I continued, “It really makes me... so...” Why was I hesitating? I hated him. Right?

All of a sudden, I realized that the redness in my face wasn't anger. It was a blush. Then I stopped talking, frozen by this sudden realization. Michael asked, “Yes? What does it make you?” I said nothing, instead I stood up and looked at him straight in the eye, with his back to the bar table. He continued to look puzzled, until I started passionately kissing him, knocking over glass bottles and containers as we continued to kiss. Everyone watching groaned. They were waiting to see what the two of us did, and in the span of about three hours, I had already hit on and kissed two different people. I

knocked over a priceless bottle or plum wine, shattering it to bits. A nearby sorcerer said, "*Selective Temporal Rewind*," and the plum wine inserted itself back into the bottle which reformed itself. Unfortunately, it was policy, it touches the floor, any food or drink must be poured out. I was threatening to break that one again, plus about five or ten others. "Stop making out in this bar! You're wrecking the place!" the barkeep said.

Of course, we ignored her, stopping only long enough that the barkeep manage to put away all her bottles, as it was beyond even the best sorcerer to have enough mystic power to keep fixing things. At about that point though the bar table smashed under the weight of both of us, and Lajila the barkeeper had enough. "All those who defile this sacred bar shall be... cast out!" Everyone in the bar acted at bouncers, lifting the two of us while chanting "*wasshoi*." The key was not to resist. Michael, on the other hand, squirmed so much that he managed to knock himself unconscious. This is probably what Bahamut saw from the sky as I carried him. What nobody saw, however, was me ducking into an old abandoned house to finish what we started.

CHAPTER 3

In which the book sheds its PG rating, as how sex works is explained.

LILITH

Michael, when he regained consciousness, appeared to be still interested. He slowly peeled my clothing off, being careful not to muss anything up. Forget that, I decided, as I ripped off his toga. Michael's body was toned with lean muscle. Angels were in peak shape physically, but not musclebound. Michael had the body of a runner or ski jumper, very strong-looking but also lightweight. In contrast, my body looked healthy or average but was dense muscle and bone, making me weigh much more than I appeared to. Demons could fly, but it was through a great deal of effort.

Michael started by suckling my breasts, while I put him inside me. You sometimes see this in porn, with people beating off furiously especially during masturbation stuff. No. Sex is about rhythm. And sexual positions that seem good in theory have to be thought through. With him still sucking my breasts, his head was pushing at a strange angle, and we were being pulled apart. Needless to say, we changed positions. We sat up slightly, while I kissed him. He was facing me, and I was slightly on top, which to be honest I prefer (even though it threatens a lot of guys). He pulled me close by grabbing just below my wings and near my shoulder and the side of my breasts, and we got back into our, ahem, rhythm. Since a lot of me was unoccupied, I decided to use my tail a bit to liven things up.

As I've said before, my tail is my main sex organ in addition to being a weapon. And yes, I do have to wash it to keep it from becoming funky. It's basically a big hard spear that can poke through stuff if I want it hard or a super-long super-flexible penis. I had it as hard as a spear though, and was making little cuts in his back, because I'm a sadist. Nothing too deep, I'm not evil, just some love cuts. Right about this point, he was turned on by all this, because it was enough to get him to blow a load. He continued and after a bit, I also came. In fact, I kinda lost control of my tail for a second there. "**Owww**!!!" he yelled. I panicked, because it was one thing to just do play masochism, but to actually hurt a lover... I apologized, and we stopped for awhile.

Angels and demons don't normally have to worry about making each other pregnant. Despite my curvy body, I have no eggs to speak of, only sperm that collects and is made inside my tail. And angels were cursed with mostly male bodies, but only being able to reproduce in their female form. The whole incident with Noah's Ark began because of angels becoming male and getting it on with human women. So God decided to mix their sexes up. He gave us demons female bodies, but only made their "male organ" fertile. And he gave most of the remaining Seraphim a choice. Become unable to have sex, or split into an angel and demon, like what happened to those hybrids.

Michael used his healing to stop the bleeding, and we waited for a bit. As I didn't want to hurt him, I made my tail softer. I didn't want to be too hard, after all. Seeing this change, Michael who apparently didn't know demons could use their tails this way

despite hunting them for nearly a millennia, proposed something. He said, “You know, I wouldn't mind being the girl.” I gasped, “Are you sure? You could get pregnant! And you'll be stuck as a female for 12 months!” He nodded, “I know. I’m prepared for that.”

Angelic pregnancies are flawless. As a woman, she wouldn't have any labor pains, since her child would not be flesh and blood, but an angel. Remember, all angels start as a ball of light. Her body would glow sometimes and she would have to maintain a fixed form or miscarry, but otherwise there were no drawbacks. But still, the length of the term was a nuisance. Seeing that Michael was serious, I sighed, “All right, let's get to it then.”

Watching someone turn from male to female is a bit strange to look at. Michael wasn't at all hairy, so there wasn't that, but as we were both naked, I could see everything as it happened. First, his muscle and fat distribution changed. Nothing too drastic, Michael didn't develop hips or butt like Kim Kardashian, there was a mild change, and that was it. His shoulders began to shrink as well, and his hands and feet got slightly smaller. Next, his balls started to shrink, and began to rise until they were inside his body. Her hips widened some more, and I figured something was changing internally. Her turgid penis shrunk and shrunk and gradually changed, until the testicles had become ovaries inside her, and the penis became a clit. The space where the two had been became a cavity, and then became a vagina as flesh formed and shaped. Lastly, she began to grow breasts. She hadn't had a masculine jawline or face, she didn't have body or pubic hair, and she didn't have an Adam's apple or anything, so she was pretty much done. I looked at her. A beautiful blond woman blinked, and stared back at me. “D-do I look all right?” she stuttered. I didn't know what to say, so I showed her. Apparently, when the strong-willed self-righteous angel went female, she went from very cocky to pretty submissive and shy. She was out of her depth. *Time to take advantage of that*, I said to myself.

Now, you might think that the first thing I'd do now that she was female was to go inside her. But this isn't it. We were both women, and since much of this was new to me, I was determined to explore as much as possible. That's right. I'm pretty much a virgin. Most of “experience” is from looking things up, including weird things from the *Kama Sutra*. And some of it, like getting stung by wasps, I decided to disregard entirely.

Lying above her, I kissed her cheeks and then started exploring. My first target were her small, but ideally shaped breasts, which I kissed, sucked, and bit. She moaned at the last part, but I was careful to be gentle this time. I licked her from her chest to her stomach, but while I was kissing her belly, she decided to take some initiative, and started massaging my breasts. I sat up, and let her have her turn, using her tongue to good effect. We bumped breasts against each other, bobbing them gently against each other. Then she went back to sucking on my breasts. I switched off with her again, putting my whole mouth around her cute mounds. She spread her legs, and I explored her down there. Her new clit was the first thing I saw, and I started licking at it before moving on to her main opening. Before I could, I felt a sharp almost ticklish sensation as I realized I was also being licked down there. Unlike Michael, I had a decent bush, so every little sensation was felt by my hair. I giggled, stopping what I was doing for a second before continuing on, thrusting my tongue inside her like a finger. Not that I'd use my finger. She'd gone through a massive change recently, and my nails were too sharp. I'd tear her apart if I wasn't careful. I grabbed her around the waist and hoisted her around me, and she moved into position to scissor. That went on for awhile, she tried a few other positions that I don't know about since I'm an amateur. It was time now.

Around came my tail, and because I was well and truly turned on right now, it was filled with my cum. I put my tail in her mouth first, moving in almost to her tonsils while she sucked, until it spurted in her mouth with its white cream. With my quivering tail still covered in my juices, I jammed it in her moist crotch. Harder. And again, until I came once more, inside of her. We continued through the night before finally heading to the hot spring, to wash off all the sex fluids (that weren't inside us, that is). Feeling clean and refreshed, we went back toward the inn to rejoin the others. I even helped her hide the fact that she has transformed. Only, before we made it back, Michael started to throw up.

MICHAEL

Angels don't have pregnancies in quite the same way as humans. Many of them do not arrive by birth at all, but are created. But the ones that are born, there is a whole process. All of this is explained in great detail within *What To Expect When You're An Angel*.

If in fact, an angel does take on a female form and bear a child, the angel's egg accepts genetic material as normal. The difference is not merely that one pregnancy takes twelve months and the other takes nine. Angelic pregnancies allow the person to discover the fact almost immediately, as the pregnant angel is violently ill the first hour of pregnancy. Angelic metabolism being as fast as it is, most ailments are not felt at all, and if they are, they are flushed from the body rather quickly, so an expecting "mother" can expect to be sick as early as possible, as violently as possible, and more or less well as soon as possible. And so, it would be reasonable to ask why pregnancy takes so much longer. After all, everything else is cured faster, why not that?

Well, to explain directly, angel pregnancy is not a physical process. There is no water breaking because after the initial nausea, there is no water. The egg and sperm merge together, and there is the sickness, but this is where similarities end. The combined materials begin to undergo a sort of biological thermal reaction, shedding more and more physical mass and turning into energy. It could perhaps be compared to the process of spontaneous combustion, except that this tends to happen to elderly women with a history of alcoholism, while angelic pregnancy was a controlled process. Once the mass broke down completely, it more resembled a star than a liquid mass. There were in fact some issues with such a pregnancy. I would periodically feel the baby "kicking" as this raw energy spent the year figuring out how to organize its energy into consciousness, sentience, and a solid form. Whenever this happened, my own personal barrier would be mixed with another aura, and my Script usage would be more powerful. While this sounds good, imagine trying to start a fire on some wood and instead burning trees around you and missing the wood entirely. The same is true of summoning things, if baby started to kick, summoning a chicken to prepare for dinner might instead summon Mega Ultra Chicken. And while I could maintain my male form for about the first week or so, I'd eventually become female for the rest of the year. I'm sure things would be okay though, we'd probably get done with our quest before anyone noticed anything amiss.

CHAPTER 4

In which Ambrosia fails math and stalls for time, thwarting Michael's plans.

AMBROSIA

I had to drag this out as long as possible. Yeah, I know Belial was eventually gonna destroy the world. But if about a day on Earth was sixty days, that was plenty of time. Wait, the math on this seems backwards... oh nevermind, I'll tell them that and they'll believe it. I'll need a year to win back Nevras. Even if it dooms the rest of the Earth.

We made it to the portal again with Bahamut's help, and went closer and closer to the thing. While Nevras and I had a nice kiss, I realized we needed to spend as much time as possible to be sure that he wouldn't leave me. I might have to stall for time.

I said, "I hear that the time difference between Earth and the Realm of Void is about 60 to 1. Elias, how long would it take for Belial to destroy the Earth from within the Realm of Void?" Elias did some quick math and said, "Angels and demons are powerful, but limited in reach. Angels weren't given the ability to learn spells, they have their natural Script power, while most demons, aside from Fallen have only Hellfire. Fallen have both, of course, but their effective radius is based on their power. The most powerful one in Hell is Satan, although some say he's a Fallen not a demon. When last we visited, I asked him about his effective range. It seems he could easily destroy too. I'm pretty sure other demons challenge this all the time, and if Belial were stronger they'd all try to free him. I'm not saying he's not plenty strong, though, tempting a man from inside an urn, but he can't destroy the world with just his spells. No, that would require a ritual. The wider the range of a ritual, the longer it takes to set up. Now, if I put this here, carry that... around 30 years, I'd say." I explained to everyone, "Let's see... 180 days divided by 60 is about three days, so if we spend a year on New Earth, less than a week will have

passed where Belial is. That should give us plenty of time to train!"

GOD

She had the entire thing backwards. Probably intentionally. A year on Earth is 60 years there. This would give Belial plenty of time to prepare his ritual to merge the New Earth back with the Void, destroying both, as well as cast all kinds of offensive magic through the portal. Of course, anyone who has played an RPG knows that he won't just get to this plan but give other people all the time in the world until they are about to do it, then things get tense. Despite the fact that Elias should have pointed out this fact immediately, his time with Aqorm had made him socially aware. He looked at Ambrosia's face, shrugged his shoulders, and just let her tell this glaring lie.

NEVRAS

I watched as we walked away from the portal and instead went on a quest to train, according to Ambrosia. She had originally considered fighting strawmen, who were absurdly easy to defeat yet gave a lot of experience. But strawmen are boring, so I talked her out of it. We wound up fighting wolves in Kirin. I agreed to do this only on the condition that we also trained weather endurance, so Ambrosia and Michael had to drop their barriers and suck it up. Every now and then, we moved to desert areas just to get a feel for other extremes. I had the group train in the water, even learning to hold their breath. I was taught this method by the army and if we were indeed training in earnest, then I was going to make pretty sure the others knew their fundamentals.

After this, I fought with each of the group members in turn. "Okay, show me what you've got..." I looked at Ambrosia and I was pretty skeptical, though. "Let's get back to you. Ambrosia, I want you to chop wood and carry water."

The conditions were not ideal for training. The sun didn't really rise since Belial merged the two worlds. I mean, we did have some light, but it was more like twilight for most of the day. The sky was without any blue during the day, and at night the moon was very faint. I had heard that some mad sorcerer was trying to restore the blue to the sky by encouraging a lot of people to have sex. In any case, our battle would not only require us to deal with the cold temperatures of Kirin but also the dark gray skies lending to an intense midday gloom.

I motioned to Aqorm. She started by tossing her throwing knives at me. So far, I was getting pretty good training too. I had a tower shield, but I put it down to instead work of parrying. I got a good rhythm going, but Aqorm sped up her throws. I had to be pretty clever to block, and eventually gave it up and tried to dodge. I grabbed my shield, intending to try learning shield skills like I saw from Sera. She tossed her knives, and I moved my shield with it, feeling out whatever technique came naturally. I had never tried to use such moves, and had never gotten formal training. I just tried to do the same sort of technique as when I used my sword, only apply it defensively. "*Magnetism*!" I shouted, as I swung my shield. I hadn't seen Sera use this one, but it seemed intuitive. The shield didn't do any Jedi-style pulling of weapons, it just guided stuff toward the center of the shield. The knives grazed the shield and bounced to the ground. Aqorm pulled out her elven knives. She had only two of those, but they were largely non-magnetic. I blocked her knives with my shield, but Aqorm was quicker and ran to my side, dealing a glancing blow to my shoulder. I dropped my shield again, since it was screwing with my visibility. It was strenuous work parrying two blades with one sword, but somehow I managed. Aqorm backed up, and used her geomancy, drawing out ice and snow. A pillar of ice formed around my body. I had to act quickly.

Improvising a technique, I used my sword. I called out "*Flame Sword*!" Flame circled around my body. This wasn't an offensive technique, but a barrier of flame against harm. I could move around, but my sword was fixed in an upward position. I walked out of the ice pillar, and I was free.

I congratulated Aqorm for her good effort. Zoe was next. For the purposes of this training, I had Lilith and Michael fight each other, while I handled most of the rest. The others couldn't handle the strength or speed of those two, but I was going to train against everyone in turn, and train them to be able to fight each other and win. Zoe called out, "*Fire*!" However, before she could cast, I smacked her with the flat of my sword. "Do

you see this?" I pointed out, "spells that are cast verbally telegraph to any decent fighter that you are gathering runes. I want all of you working on not calling out spells." Zoe said, "That's great, but how do we do this?"

Azrael explained to Elias and Zoe, since the others didn't conventionally cast, "When you recite a verbal spell, you are gathering runes in a central location based on spoken word. Many people compare it to saying a prayer aloud to God. To use a spell silently on the other hand, requires concentration and focus. I requires commitment." From what I heard, the first few times a person tried this, it took enough effort that spells were actually slower, not faster. Elias was open and honest, and didn't really see any need to hide what we was going to do, so his personality temperament wasn't suited for Silent Spells. So I wound up tying his hands and trying to get him to use Still Spells instead. Azrael also learned this, because she soaked up magical skills like a sponge. While I managed to eventually triumph over Zoe's scythe attacks and her magic was still too slow, Elias was surprisingly tough for a non-combatant. He was pretty good with his staff, and now that his Still Spell freed up his hands, he could basically call out spells while swinging his weapon. I had to fight hard to get him to give up.

Azrael was even tougher. She had both Silent Spells and Still Spells, she could use Solid Spells, and she could call forth magic while attacking and cast quickly without words. Thankfully, it appeared she currently hadn't figured out how to do both at once. This would take more focus and training, but if she ever pulled it off, she'd be a match for someone like Lilith, who could use powers basically on impulse. She swung Raphael, and it became a match between magical swords. Her sword radiated heat even from where I stood, yet my sword withstood the assault. I parried her blows and swung low, grazing her clothing, and then I swung down and slashed near her forehead. With an uppercut slash, she sliced from my cheek to just above my eyebrow.

Nervous about getting wounded way worse if I continued, I got Elias to heal us. I told the others, "Ummmm, good work everyone. Remember, continue practicing among yourselves." Aqorm trained with Zoe, helping her improve her blocking with her scythe, while Aqorm practiced predicting and dodging Zoe's Silent Spells. Once Elias finished healing me, he worked on Azrael, and then the two squared off to train their spells. Lilith and Michael had been fighting all this time, and appeared to enjoy doing it. From the looks of it, they were evenly matched. But they didn't seem to be taking this seriously.

I looked around at Ambrosia. She had been chopping wood and carrying water for quite some time. In the beginning, it had just been been about building muscle. But as time went on, she looked like she had developed some inner meaning to it. Her mastery of her Conception tool grew more profound. She was able to change its form almost instantly, and she had fine-tuned how any weapons she made with it looked and behaved. Her axe had become as sharp as she wanted it, and she learned how to cut through objects with a thought. And, thanks to hauling water, she learned to move more precisely and carefully, and she had more endurance. Better still, she was covered in sweat. As any male knows, even one like me, having women sweat is very sexy. I wanted to jump her bones right now, but other people were present. I'm not sure we were that close yet.

Instead, I invited Ambrosia to spar with me. "Come at me!" I told her. Ambrosia waved her fishing pole around, but she caught nothing. I stood just out of reach. She changed her pole into something vaguely resembling a glaive. I strapped my shield to my back and kept a defensive stance up. I swung my sword in a wide arc but she stepped back just at the right moment. She thrust down with the weapon, but I lifted my blade high enough to block it. I pushed upward and she wobbled slightly. Ambrosia was always on stance lately, so I decided to see if I could exploit her momentary loss of balance. I pushed the offensive, using my Speed Slash technique. I didn't want to hurt her too badly, so I sheathed my sword just before I drew. The extra weight of the sheath slowed my technique down just fast enough for her to see my move. Her dodging ability was incredible! The Speed Slash normally has what looks to be a single slash but is actually about seven or so, so fast that a talented warrior can make those extra strikes look invisible. But she managed to step in and out of these strikes, and emerged untouched. I was going to do my Standing Jump Thrust to push her over, but she used her halberd thingy to stop my attack mid-swing

There is something you should know about these techniques. They aren't simple attacks like most spells, they have martial arts theory embedded in them. So, a simple weapon attack that blocks a technique will often trigger the *second* technique hidden in the first. That is, when Ambrosia blocked my Jump Thrust, it triggered the secret Backspin Vortex ability. My swing rotated in the opposite direction, knocking her glaive right out of her hand. If her reflexes had been slightly worse, she'd have no hand.

All Conception weapons are property of their respective holders, so her glaive returned as a fishing rod strapped to her backpack. But Ambrosia was done using weapons against me. Instead, she tried some martial arts, slamming me with her feet and fists. I swung back with my sword, having unsheathed it for the time being, but she wasn't in that spot anymore. I looked around, and Ambrosia had somehow made a nearly 270º step, sweeping in front of me to at an angle behind me. She nudged me with her palms, then side-stepped again just before I finished swing at her. I tried again and again to hit her, only to realize too late that I had not concentrated on the bigger picture. Her Crest was glowing. She had completed one of her dances. I was hit point blank by the wind attack of the Crest of Four Gods, sending me flying before I smashed hard against the ground. She had won, though I wouldn't be able to admit it for hours.

AMBROSIA

It's not good to do nothing but training. Granted, since my original goal was not to train at all but to spend more time with him. And so, after he lost horribly to my Four Gods attack, we hauled him off on a stretcher to just outside of Kirin. It was Christmas Eve tonight, and according to legend, there was a small town which only appeared from the 24th of Dog until what was known as Epiphany. The town was covered with decorations and lights, and filled with merriment. It was a regular Christmas Village!

This village made gifts for people young and old, even though there was a weak tradition of gift-giving nowadays. While the New Earth wasn't particularly charitable, the sudden break in the season where everyone got presents, even when they didn't understand why, made a difference in the general state of the world. Around this time, despite there being no formal holiday to shop for, people started behaving just slightly kinder, and people mellowed out about things like training for difficult battles.

I remember getting gifts when I was a child. I don't remember ones from my original mother clearly, but I got some when I was with my adoptive mother. Like, one year, I got a bucket of coal and a new switch. I enjoyed those immensely! I used the second gift to ride our family horse around, and the first one kept us warm all winter! I don't think there even is such a thing as a bad gift from Santa.

But perhaps I should clarify what I mean by Santa. Saint Nicholas was an early Christian bishop of the city of Myrna around Greece and Turkey. He was famed for his good works, and his legend continued after his death. In his honor, people began to give gifts to each other around this time. There was originally a separate festival for Saint Nicholas and for Christmas, in order to celebrate Jesus's birth, but gradually they became part of one celebration. And so it was here in this village. Now, the problem was, Saint Nicholas was ultimately a regular human, not a Saint. As you remember, Saints are crazy immortal types that aren't bound by death. So, one of God's angels took the job of delivering presents. It's important to remember, the "gods" worshiped by ancient people aside from God fell into two categories: immortals and idols. Idols were just man-made statues with no actual presence in this world, but immortals were also once considered gods in their own right. When Saint Nicholas died, Odin picked up the slack. Of course, he had a different name as an angel, but yeah, it was Odin. Rather than short little elves like on Christmas cards, his elves were from Alfheim. And "Santa" typically gave presents at the end of his war parties or "wild hunts" and they tended to be badass functional gifts rather than some commercial item. I got warm blankets, new clothes, and even a fishing pole over the years. Yup, that's when I got my fishing pole I now have, it was delivered by Santa. I'm pretty sure that's where Nevras got most of his dresses too, because he couldn't rightly buy these in a store, being a celebrity and stuff. There weren't eight tiny reindeer either, there was Sleipnir and his eight legs flying over houses to deliver stuff. And Santa's wife wasn't some kindly old lady. She was Frigg, a hot

immortal, able to see in advance what gifts people would appreciate, and who was gifted with great wisdom. Odin did sometimes wear red, but he wasn't particularly fat, and he had an eyepatch. He looked less like a jolly old man and more like some badass.

And this Christmas Village didn't look like a giant toy factory, it was more like a Thomas Kinkade painting of some Danish or German town covered in soft snow. It was located in the East Pole, and time was a bit weird here. Since the town winked in and out of existence, this meant that while time passed normally, if you stayed after Epiphany when it disappeared, you could only leave the town the next year. This meant you were effectively unable to age as long as you stayed. The town was quaint and peaceful and the elves (when they weren't slaughtering and eating wolves) were friendly enough. We rented a room the first night in a small cottage by the outskirts. We intended to stay alone, but guest after guest came to welcome us. Frigg came first, saying that it was not right for guests to be without some hot cocoa and some milk and cookies. There are seven major cookies that appear around Christmas Village: Pepperkaker, Bordstabler, Krumkaker, Spritz, Berlinerkranser, Snipp, and Fattigmann. Fattigmann are fried with some confectioner's sugar dusting, Snipp are cinnamon cookies, Berlinerkranser look almost like pretzels coated with pearl sugar instead of salt, Spritz are cookies with sprinkles and festive shapes (basically what people would call “sugar cookies” except with almond extract), Krumkaker are funnel-shaped and firm like a waffle, Bordstabler have a sort of sweet topping, and Pepperkaker are spice cookies. We had to try each of them, plus a healthy dose of milk. The milk in question turned out reindeer milk, which was almost like we were drinking heavy cream.

The elves came next, and brought some fresh wolf meat for us to eat. It usually had a terrible smell, since many wolves survive on low-quality food often eating members of their own pack that are sick or injured, along with mice, insects, and carrion, for big game like elk and moose is a rarity. But this town seems to have a fair number of elk for the elves to ride, and the elves knew how to prepare it correctly. Wolf meat was safe to eat, and pretty tasty though somewhat tough. The elves knew what they were doing.

Santa visited us next as an old traveler, but you could totally tell because of his eyepatch. We shared some of the food that the others had given us, and in return we were given a roast goose with *foie gras* and cranberries and mustard greens. It's hard to believe people acted like foie gras was cruel, while they raised chicken and cattle in dark cages. Hypocrites. True, the goose was force fed, but I'm not sure it's anyone's right to decide what people can and can't eat. Geese, though, should totally be forced to eat until fat.

As it was, the meal was awesome. We also managed to score some side dishes, so it was a good change of pace from having too much meat. They gave us barley and mixed vegetables, green bean casserole (the one with creamy mushroom sauce and fried onions), carrots with horseradish sauce, and wild mushrooms in meat gravy. We had done a fair amount of exploring but had not always eaten well. We made up for it tonight.

And then, the guests went home. Santa/Odin said he had some “business” to take care of. His wife kissed him and promised to give him a good time when he got back, winking at him. And the elves made it out of our cottage in a bit of a drunken stupor, having competed with Aqorm, who they insisted was not a “real” elf, until they saw her drink most of them under the table. One last thing. Before bed, I told Nevras, “I love you.” Supposedly, if you confessed your feelings before Christmas Eve was over, it was meant to be. “I love you too,” Nevras said, “although it's been awhile since we managed a proper date.” We all settled in for a long winter nap.

The next morning, everything was different. We had presents, yes, but something more important was here. The baby Jesus. In a small bed that had just appeared in the middle of the room, a small child of about just a bit under two sat up. The child was male, with long brown hair. At least, we *thought* the child was male. It didn’t matter. The kid started making themselves breakfast. They turned on the stove, and added some eggs, standing on a small stool. “Hey there,” the child said, “come have breakfast?” I looked around the kitchen. The stool had come from nowhere. So had the eggs.

These stoves used CasterTech™ system, because enchantments were no solution to cooking, the inventor of these stoves tried to replicate the idea of an actual Fire spell being cast. It still demanded that wood be brought in for fuel. CasterTech advancements

were rare, since they involved the device drawing in runes on command, and only common runes to the area were readily drawn. It was shocking to me that a CasterTech stove could even work in an area like this that never seemed to get warm. Jesus turned to look at us. Seeing Nevras and Azrael had scars from earlier, the child took the meal off the stove and touched us. “You should have told me that you were hurt,” Jesus said.

I've always wondered if Jesus was just a really good wizard, surrounded as he is in a world where virtually anyone can cast a spell. But watching this kid work, I suddenly understood the distinction. When Azrael and Elias healed, there was use of mystic power, the sign of runes, and the healing was good yet flawed. Nevras and the others of us who had been hurt in the past did have some scar tissue, even though Elias had gotten much faster and more powerful since our journey began. Jesus had no discernible energy transfer, in fact, it wasn't clear *how* this kid was healing us. Jesus's hands simply opened up, and suddenly all scars were gone on anyone touched. Jesus went back to cooking, and served all of us some bread, eggs, a bit of fruit, and some feta. He seemed to have pulled this out of nowhere, which was magically impossible. Creation magic was difficult, and typically limited to summoning over stuff that already existed or creating nonliving matter. Food was almost impossible to make even for angels like Michael. So how was this kid doing this? I mean, he definitely couldn't cast spells.

It was simple food, but all of us were fed as nicely as if we had a fine meal like yesterday. It tasted like something a Super Chef would make, exceptional in its simplicity, yet full of freshness and flavor.

After this, Jesus talked with us about our journey and listened to our adventures so far. We all walked outside to enjoy a winter stroll. Jesus seemed under-dressed, wearing only linen and some sandals, but while the snow was deep enough for most of us to sink about to our hips, Jesus just calmly walked over the surface of the snow. Only Aqorm and Michael managed to do this, Michael because he was an angel, Aqorm because she had the natural grace and weight distribution of an elf. But Aqorm was still cold, and Michael kept warm only because of his barrier. Jesus didn't seem phased by anything from the natural world. We walked beside each other in groups of two or three, enjoying the sights of the town. Jesus poked at me, and I walked a little slower so I could talk privately with this kid. “It's sweet that you're doing this to spend more time with Nevras. I approve, and I'll prevent Belial from destroying this world,” Jesus whispered, “but at some point, for the sake of honesty in your relationship, you will need to tell him the truth.” I nodded, and whispered back, “I understand. But just a bit longer. I want to tell him how I feel.” This child nodded, striking me as oddly mature for his or her age. We spent more time around Christmas village, connecting with all of its weird occupants, and with Jesus while we were here, and we stayed until New Year's Day. Jesus recommended honesty, but at the same time I was given many options for spending time with my man.

For Christmas, I got a backpack with limitless storage space (but not limitless size, so I could fit an endless supply of accessories and potions and such but not something like a piano) and which didn't seem to transfer weight.. Nevras got a nice blanket, that was able to protect the group from sight, not to mention being pretty warm. We just couldn't move around with it because it was some sort of camouflage. Elias got some nice toffee, an advanced prayer book, and some fleece socks. Aqorm got some fine silver knives to replace her many throwing knives. Zoe got a scythe made from cold iron and reinforced with an elven handle. Azrael got another musical instrument, this one was an Exorcist Flute. It looked like a simple ocarina, but you could tell it had some serious power. There were about four or so songs she could play with the limited number of holes: she could play a song that activated artifacts and ancient ruins, another that governed time and could trap critters in a weird looking box, another that swept wind around and occasionally made rain storms that opened underground passages, and finally one that changed night into day causing undead or plants to get sunlight. This was about the only useful one, but I suppose it was nice to have something you could play some songs on. Lilith got a whetstone, but no knife yet. And lastly, Michael got a new bow that formed its own arrows from solidified light and thus had no limit to what he could fire. Why, I'll bet it could even take down a giant demon pig! We were satisfied with our gifts, but we didn't want to overstay our welcome.

And so it came to pass, that after we left Christmas village, I told Nevras and the

others that we needed to go fishing. Their response, of course, was, “What?!? Why?” And so I gave them a 'reason' like, “I need to completely master my Conception weapon. The best way to do that is to figure out all aspects of its use through application. I'll also need to do some farming. And mining.” Technically, this was true. The more I would develop compatibility with my tool, the stronger I was using it. The Conception weapon still felt awkward, and I had trouble changing it. I knew how to fish though, obviously.

CHAPTER 5

In which Ambrosia and Nevras go bass fishing.

NEVRAS

We had a boat from earlier, so it was merely a matter of anchoring the thing and finding a good spot. First, we tried the desert island near Goji and Seikai, looking to do some saltwater fishing. Ambrosia cast without bait, and waited. After about an hour, she randomly caught an especially stupid flounder. It was undersized, so we threw it back. About thirty minutes later, we caught what looked like the *same* flounder. “Fuck it,” said Ambrosia, “let's use this fish as bait.” And so, she hooked the flounder so it wouldn't get away. The fish was still alive and swimming, so she was constantly unsure whether we had got something or not, because the line kept moving.

Suddenly, it became very clear that she had caught something. It was a much stronger pull than before, but Ambrosia did have that ability to lift stuff like boulders so she managed. Barely. I held her steady by the waist, as she tugged this way and that. At last she pulled it to the ship and... holy carp, it was a great white! The shark let go the fish that it had been munching on, and flopped about, trying to bite us. As everyone knows from the six-part documentary series *Sharknado*, sharks can survive not only on land but even in the airless void of space. So rather than gasping for air, it actively chased after all of us, hungering for flesh. The current fishing laws proposed by the Council did not require any fishing licenses but they did have regulations. You couldn't catch a fish that appeared to be spawning, you couldn't catch immature fish except to use for bait, and you generally couldn't keep sharks except for research. Of course, many people claimed they were doing research for the latter, but their “research” tended to end up being done in a restaurant. We cut the whole animal up, setting aside the fins. That night, we had shark fin soup, and made plans to instead go freshwater fishing. Most sharks are exclusively saltwater critters except for the bull shark and Bizant River shark, so we would have less troubles with the law. We left the area, having stored the animal on ice for meat.

We cooked our meal as we sailed away from the area. It really isn't like one might think. You boil the fins, and scrape off the skin and meat, which leaves behind protein fiber that gets shredded and put in the soup. Shark fin is not naturally soft, it has to be cooked for almost a full day. People used to ban the thing, but that just made more sharks get cut up for their fins, or worse, to just toss them in the trash and just use the meat. Although people were supposed to only catch them for research, the Council realized they couldn't enforce this, so they just had this as a guideline, to keep people from catching shark after shark and only using them for their fin. The actual dish, however, was underwhelming. It had virtually no taste aside from the broth, it was just texture. But I knew this, having been born into royalty. But I still much preferred the actual meat of the shark to its fin. It was mainly a matter of not wasting anything. We salted the meat and put it in barrels to ferment and gain flavor. We might have some of that later.

Parking our boat near Galaxia, we set out for a small pond. Bass fishing was out, so we dug around the ground until we found what we needed. That would be nightcrawlers, loads and loads of them. We packed these wriggly things into a small jar and walked to the nearest pond. It was winter, so the lake was frozen. Zoe decided to work some more on Silent Spells, so she cast Fire on the lake, numerous times, turning the water from frozen to boiling. We caught plenty of fish then. They ummm kinda floated to the surface. Wisely, I decided our experiment with fishing was over.

The worms turned out to be a wasted investment, as we never got to use them, so we stored the assorted fish away for later. There was some catfish, which we processed with

Cajun spices. The rest was assorted trout, perch, pike, and walleye. We did manage to catch one largemouth bass, weighing about 35 lb. That was about 13 lb more than any known record, but well, we did manage to empty out the lake. We cut the bass up into chunks, putting some in salt for later like the shark had been, and some we cooked up with the catfish for tonight's dinner. We were going to divide the rest into fish chowder or fish sauce. It wasn't the Vietnamese variety, however, it was a homemade variety. In order to mix together to make this we needed six cloves of garlic, 3 tablespoons of salt, 6 bay leaves, 3 tablespoons of peppercorns, 1 ½ lb of fish, about 2 cups of fresh water, and 2 tablespoons of brine from some other fermented thing like sauerkraut. Of course, we had hundreds of times that amount of fish. We'd have to measure fish by the gallon! And I wasn't even sure how to process this much in proportion to all that.

Having leftover food from earlier to store on our ship, including some boar meat and deer meat that Ambrosia couldn't really explain, we were going to salt all of this, but then Elias latched upon an idea. “Hey, my Preserve spell would work, but I'm not sure I have enough mystic power to use on all this! Let's head to Phoenix,” he said. And so we did.

ELIAS

I think now is as good a time as any to explain units of measurement. Temperature, as you know, as using Double Celsius. This was decided as a method of accurately gauging temperature, since starting the freezing temperature at anything besides 0 degrees made no sense for any practical use (ruling out Fahrenheit), while Celsius was too inaccurate for any real science since temperatures were too far apart. Now 38ºC was converted to 76ºℂ. Weight used a hybrid of several systems ranging from ounces, to pounds, to stone (ten stone in this case was exactly 150 lb), then hundredweight, then ton. Length went from nanometers and millimeters to centimeters, then inches, feet, cubits, yards, *li*, and miles. A *li* was an ancient Chinese measurement equal to roughly ½ a kilometer. Kilometers were only used in reference to *li*, the Council had mostly managed to abolish the influence of the French and their damned metric system which imposed such evil on the world. Dirty communists! Time was pretty much unchanged, from seconds to days to months and years, to decades, centuries, and millennia. Then you got into cooking measurements, which went from teaspoons, to tablespoons, to cups, pints, quarts, and gallons. But it didn't end there, 8 gallons was a bushel, 16 gallons was an octave, 32 gallons was an aum, and a stuck was measurement (mainly for wine) of about 260 or so gallons. The 1 ½ lb of fish in the recipe was equal by weight to about 3 cups, but all the fish chunks together made at least a stuck, far too much to handle.

Logistically, there was a problem. We hadn't enough salt to preserve this, or the other meat we had mysteriously come across. We had enough in our barrel for a week's batch of chowder, but much of this meat would go bad inside the ship, even with barrels and barrels. We were at risk of starving, despite having plenty of food.

And no, I couldn't just use magic on the problem. It was like playing *Oregon Trail* and hunting loads and loads of bison, only to have it all rot and everyone die of dysentery or something. We normally scrounged for food, now we needed to figure out how to manage it. Refrigeration was not something runes could solve. We needed a miracle.

CHAPTER 6

In which the group learns the fine art of food preservation.

NEVRAS

We arrived in Phoenix, and explained the situation to Father and Mother. Although Mother was the power behind the throne, King Charis was the public leader and made all the speeches. To the average citizen and to the Council, it was widely believed (except to those who really knew what was going on) that my dad ran the country. Mother did little to disillusion anyone of this. She came from royalty, she held all the purse-strings, and she knew how to govern a country wisely and fairly, so that the people were neither dependent nor neglected, but did their work and were law-abiding. But she was an introvert, and hated to talk to people. Father was actually a prince consort, meaning he had no real power despite being married to the queen, but she had decided to call him

King Charis for appearance sake because Prince Consort Charis did not have the same ring to it. She talked to her husband, and he basically told the citizens her speech, but with more charisma. Awhile ago, he gave like the best State of the Union speech ever.

When many countries were torn apart by the loss of the Council, and Kushiyama's push toward RFID currency, King Charis talked about uniting the various factions and how “Phoenix will never be a socialist country.” He proposed a system where workers would be better rewarded for good work, and allowed temples to care for those without means to work without intervention from the State. When other countries were reinstating income taxes and property taxes, he made it possible for families to inherit property in its full value. He prohibited the original sellers of land from evicting families, so long as they worked the land or used their business to help the kingdom. In this way, he kept his promise while keeping the commoners productive and safe. In the absence of taxes, small businesses and restaurants grew, while others pursued artistic or scientific goals. This in turn created real prosperity. After all, money that doesn’t circulate runs out.

And so, when we came with our loads of fish, King Charis inspired everyone to get involved. Loggers chopped trees to help architects make wooden storage bins. Alchemists and wonder-workers worked with artists to draft models of possible approaches to solving the problem of preserving food. Everyone who worked got a share of our food, which was good, because we probably could only handle about 10% of it. They tested with a clear chicken broth, ate some of it, banished most of this food to a dimension without time, and helped us turn some of the fish into fish sauce. Of course, having food outside our realm wasn't a solution, because we couldn't access it.

The first idea was simply heating the fish. Not to cook it, but rather to kill all bacteria. Then they let it sit for awhile. The original person who tried this idea, perhaps you've heard of him. He named his process after himself. These guys just called it thermalization. Unlike the first, they tested a both uncooked and cooked broth against open air in addition to a closed test. The original test initially seemed like the thermalized food did last longer than the uncooked, but when allowed to be exposed to real bacteria in the open air, strangely the cooked one didn't last as long. Confused, the researchers decided to do a chemical analysis. Their findings were that in general, thermalization killed all “germs,” that is to say most bacteria was killed, and so the broth was shelf stable in a hermetically sterilized container, since it had little to ferment. On closer analysis, the thermalized broth lacked all probiotics (and a great deal of vitamins and minerals were stripped in the process), which meant whatever new bacteria entered repopulated the broth *unopposed* while the other broth remained healthy. For this reason, and since the tested product was nutritionally depleted, they refused to test on the fish.

The next test was devised by the wonder-workers. Using genetic engineering, the people of Phoenix tried to “teach” bacteria to use magic (specifically the Preserve effect). Normally, this was believed impossible, because bacteria individually have almost no mystic power. However, as a group, they could in theory solve the problem of finding enough casters. After repeated attempts, the experiment was a success. The only problem was they bred out of control, there was no real way to get them to use specific spells, and they tended to consume and/or ferment any food they came into contact with. Frustrated with their lack of dependability, the researchers released them out into nature. There was no way this action could go wrong. They were doing this in the name of science!

Then they tried to make an alchemical device to extract salt from seawater using turgor pressure and taking it to a reverse-osmosis filter within the ship. It of course worked, and would probably be suitable for sea travel and preserving things except for one thing. We already had salt, and we didn't want everything tasting salty. We kept this technology as it had the added bonus of helping us get fresh water during our trip. We got this installed on our boat, now gaining a seawater extractor for distilling our water. Riding Bahamut was faster, but we could carry more food and supplies with this boat. But our main problem wasn't solved. We still needed a way to preserve fresh food without getting stuff like fresh fruit to be salty.

The people of Phoenix next latched on the idea of developing a Paradox Engine. A Paradox Engine worked on principles that reversed the normal connections of cause and effect. For example, slicing a knife across your face would heal any cut that existed there,

and trying to heat water was instead likely to create ice. It was difficult to heat the water in the first place, except that there were gaps in the mechanism that allowed the initial cause to remain the same. The idea was good, as without magic one could transform water into ice, and from there attempts to melt the ice would fail since melting would be reversed by the Paradox Engine. Ultimately, though, they gave up at the attempt. Only someone brilliant and insane could understand the logic needed to produce such a device.

Lastly, they used alchemy to produce a time suspension box that they called a Retemporizer™. Or Preserver for short (yeah, I know, different word entirely). When the box was open, the device would shut off instantly, preventing any drawbacks like having your hand frozen in place while reaching for lettuce. Despite possible complications of this alchemy, like crumbling the universe as we know it if it were to malfunction, they decided that this was the safest method. I kinda wondered how it worked though.

YAZIM JIANNE

Having literally nothing better to do but wait for Ambrosia to choose whether or not she would invite me into her party, I worked feverishly on a project. The base assumptions of reality are that given M = matter, AM = antimatter, E = energy, EA = energy antimatter, DM = dark matter, and DE = dark energy, then this implies that the universe would operate (M x AM)/DM → (E x EA)/DE. Before we go any further, I shall explain my equation. Without complicated decimal math, matter and energy are matter and energy. Sometimes energy is translated as mystic power, which means magic is also energy. All of this is irrelevant, however, since dark matter does not have a value, zero or otherwise, since it cannot be proven to exist. Regardless, my formula is balanced. What's that? Nonsense, you say?!? How dare you! Take that back!!!

Realizing that if one accepted ∞/0 = (√-Ω), I quickly set to work building a system that would alter any notions those “sensible” people had about math and science, as I worked to build a working Paradox Engine. After testing it on heat and cold, creating ice that wouldn't melt and fire that wouldn't go out and wouldn't consume its fuel, I ran into a problem. Trying to kill something that was already dead didn't work. After my initial frustration, I attempted to fill a water container that had already been emptied. I realized what was happening, as my attempts to pour only cause the water level to lower once poured. Just as the Paradox engine only allowed someone to fill something by emptying it, something had left the body of these corpses and couldn't be replaced. Goodness, had I managed to prove that souls really do exist? Further tests would be needed.

GOD

Explaining how time works to laymen will be difficult, but I shall try. In the beginning, many people ask what created me. But this question is simple, when one understands the self-collapsing universe. In the very beginning there was me, and there was the Void. The Void is not me, but also not *not* me either. I said, “*Let there be light,*” and matter existed as light, expanding with a rapid bang to make the universe as we know of it. And at the end of all time, matter will crunch back into myself and the Void.

Think of time as a helix, a beginning and an end in constant alternation. In every moment, there are two timelines in equal and opposite direction. For instance, in one version of time there would be a war that was won, while in another version this same war was lost. In some cases, this means history is completely different. These events would reconcile by merging at certain points, called a **nexus**. There was a nexus for days, weeks, months, years, decades, and so on, creating a nearly infinite number of parallel timelines. In places where multiple nexus points collided, the universe would change. And those born on these nexus points would have a great effect on history.

While the universe expands and contracts, this system allows me to mine immortal souls from the physical world. Outside of time, I now had friends like myself to talk to. This was my goal when I kept recycling the universe. Further, depending on the different souls within time, events would play out differently. This is why, despite all claims to the contrary, I am only omniscient insofar as I know how patterns play out. Every universe has some surprises, after all. For example, Universe 4B had nothing but lemmings.

When someone stops time, it selectively delays a point on the helix as though freezing the frame on a video. There was a slight displacement, but any effects of time would

proceed normally upon exiting the stopped time. This creates three timelines whenever time is stopped: the timeline around the caster (and possibly his friends) that continued as normal, the frozen time, and the time outside the effect. This meant that if you stopped time for five minutes, the caster and those outside the effect would experience time normally, while those within the field would be five minutes behind, and would gradually work to catch up over the next 24 hours.

Travel through time presented even more problems. The problem of time effects was that each helix set could potentially cross into another one at one of these nexus points, resulting in people occasionally traveling to parallel timelines. This is why trying to change time was difficult. I could see all timelines, so often I chose the best one already.

Now, stopping time with magic would preserve food but had the drawbacks of other magic. Alchemy on the other hand, was able to do so this without side effects, but in order to do this involved risk of merging timelines together and destroying history if anything went wrong. I'm sure this device was safe to use though.

CHAPTER 7

In which Ambrosia tricks everyone into inviting Yazim Jianne.

NEVRAS

Having received a few good gifts for preserving food, getting salt, and fresh water, we set out but were promptly stopped by my mom and dad. Dad gave us some milk to put in the Preserver, saying, “You need strong bones to fight evil. And what would you do if you developed osteoporosis?” It was raw milk, of course. Pasteurization had been condemned for centuries, and thermalization we'd just tried to no avail. But more than that, it was cultured milk, proven to also give us some healthy bacteria (that couldn't cast spells). Mom gave me some oranges and bananas and told me, “I don't want you getting scurvy either. And eat your vegetables!” Oh, honestly! “I'm going now!” I shouted as I got on the boat with Ambrosia. “And remember to change your...” but we put up sail before she could embarrass me any more.

“Where should we go?” I asked Ambrosia. She pointed with clear purpose, “That way.” That was in the direction of Opening. What could she want there? Ah, right, this was her homeland. Surely they would able to help us get stronger. How clever!

AMBROSIA

Actually, I just pointed randomly and acted like I knew where we were going. But come to think of it, Yazim Jianne was over in that direction. And who knows, maybe we could find some sidequest to distract everyone. Acting on that random impulse however meant going out of our way for a few days. The wind blew hard in the opposite direction, so we couldn’t go anywhere. We parked our boat back at Phoenix, and went back to Nevras's mother, against his better judgement. “Mom, we're trapped here for awhile,” Nevras requested, “will you keep our boat here while we fly Bahamut over?”

She nodded. It seemed such a shame to have all that gear and leave it behind, but I guess we had to. If only, we had something to bring our boat with us... But that was impossible. It was simply too big! I scrounged through my backpack. Hmmm, a bomb bag for carrying bombs. Useful, but not here. My cooking gear was likewise no use. We carried some potions and herbs that always seemed to be underused since we had a dedicated healer. We had arrows for long range attacks, and I decided to put these on the ship since this is where they saw the most use. Let's see... a jar of nightcrawlers. I also put this on the ship. If we needed to do fishing, these were great. Otherwise, they would keep. After the New Earth, God made certain creatures immortal: coral, certain strains of algae, beneficial bacteria, and worms. They couldn't confer immortality on others, but they would keep until being eaten. Aside from the food on the ship, we had some rations of dried meat and some remaining grain-bean buns.

Researchers found that uncooked oats and rice when compared to other grains could last 3-5 years in storage, and dried beans lasted even longer. On the other hand, fresh cooked bread only would last about a week, so they devised a dried bread. Oats and rice were mashed together with beans, a damp cloth was placed to allow cultures to grow,

then the mix was gently steamed, much like Chinese plain buns. When fresh, such buns were soft with an interesting salty taste. But this dough was typically fast-dried with magic. Wrapped in waterproof wrapping, these lasted for years. But they kinda sucked since they had to basically be eaten with water or tea, but they were nutritious enough for a long trip. Besides, compared to the price of other rations, they gave them away.

Anyway, I stuffed those back in, along with the bomb bag, bombs, and the cooking gear while I continued to look at the contents we'd dumped. There was a For Sale Sign, which I might want to use on those rare potions, if stuff ever got desperate. There were also Gorgon Anklets, Poison Armlets, and Echo Rings. The latter would protect those who could be silenced from such, although antimagic or Dispel would not be affected. I hadn't enough for everyone but enough for me, Azrael, and Elias to have Gorgon Anklets; enough for Elias, Zoe, and Azrael to have Echo Rings; and enough for everyone but Aqorm, Lilith and Michael to get poison immunity. They didn't need it anyway. After this, most of us were immune to petrifaction, poison, and silence if it even became a problem. We had Jump Boots, a Lantern, and our Party Tent, all of which I moved to a side compartment of the bag so they could easily be reached. I put on the upgraded Fire Ring on my finger making a mental note to use it more, as I remembered all the nights cooking where this would have saved some serious trouble. I found the First Flint, and shoved it back into the backpack. Then I looked at what was left.

So did Queen Victoria. “Hey,” she asked, “where did you get that? That's a Transport Coin!” I remembered that the others didn't remember I had gone back in time, so I gave a noncommittal answer about having found it, or “it was a birthday present.” I gulped suddenly. Victoria shrugged, “Well I guess you don't want to know how you can use it to solve your problem then.” I requested a private audience, and told her the truth. After listening carefully, she nodded, then brought the rest of us in.

“This Coin,” she explained, “can be attuned to link with the ship you currently have, so that you can summon it from anywhere. My court sorcerers will do the former, but to summon it, you will need a talented sorcerer to use the teleportation link. We cannot spare them, so you'll have to figure this out yourself.” I understood, and nodded as I said, “I know of one in Opening, where we're going. Don't worry.”

The sorcerers went to the port and did some complicated ritual which created a line of yellowish light from the Coin to the ship. We took the Transport Coin back, and then got on Bahamut. She carried us back to Opening quickly, and we dismounted and headed into town.

NEVRAS

Ambrosia had been different lately. Rather than being focused on finishing her quest quickly, she appeared instead to be goofing off. Rather than being peeved at this, however, I kinda liked it. She'd occasionally sing or recite poetry, she spent more time cuddling, and actually started kissing me some, at least when she was sure the others weren't looking. I had a feeling she would balk at actually having sex, but for now we were closer and more intimate than we had been in months.

We came to the town of Opening, and it was as bad as I remember. Guards were posted on the walls around the town, but unlike last time, there were none preventing exit. They had taken Ambrosia's advice, and were now getting their money through prostitution. I saw the town guards propositioning people left and right, and then going inside the strange metal huts that Opening was known for.

We tried our hardest to ignore this, and instead explored the town. We skipped over the bank, having more money than we knew what to do with but being unable to spend it due to screwed up economy. We skipped many of the shops for the same reason. I loved shopping, but unlike Phoenix, Opening had been fully okay with schemes to make money connected to the Mark. You could be tracked whenever you spent anything. Having Big Brother (so to speak) look over your shoulder whenever you bought something basically killed the fun of it. Yeah, only a portion of towns actually embraced the program, but I had trouble keeping track of it, and the ones that did looked at you like a criminal. We skipped the chockablock houses in the slums area, and we skipped the weird-looking monolith near the bank. We did stop near a poster for bounty hunting wanted posters. Ah,

so this is how Sera and Phim got paying gigs. It looked like they had creature hunts as well. I might try this later. But not here, definitely. They probably wouldn't pay us in real money here.

Having nothing better to do, I looked around town, until a thought occurred to me. There were two places that I hadn't checked, the graveyard where I saw Sarai's gravestone and that weird mansion that seemed at odds with all other houses in the town.

First, I checked the mansion. I knocked but after waiting for a few minutes, I decided nobody must be home. So I went to visit the graveyard. We indeed found Yazim Jianne there. He was adding some Forget-Me-Nots to his wife's grave when he turned around and freaked out by the number of us standing over him. As he was kinda a squishy wizard, he decided to teleport away.

As everyone knows, teleportation involves converting the body into light, and moving at that speed. Since opaque objects don't allow light to enter, he couldn't move into the house if the door was closed. So where did he go? I followed him back to the direction of the mansion, but he was gone. What happened to him?

YAZIM JIANNE

Glass windows are permeable to anyone teleporting, unless they are tinted, frosted, or stained glass. The same was true of metallic screens, since they are just porous enough that small particles can filter though. Although I had come to trust the one named Ambrosia, her friends likely blamed me for bringing ruin to the New Earth. I would have to defend myself.

As I wanted to bring Sarai back, I had turned to studies of the making of various types of chimera. I'm sure you've heard of homunculi from various legends. But as far as I know, such legends are nonsense. Artificial creatures are categorized in three major categories: undead, chimera, and golems. What people call homunculi are actually one of two things, flesh golems or true chimera. There is no such thing as a fire chimera, sorry.

But there are fire elementals. In fact, I have a water elemental to draw baths for me, and a fire elemental to heat my oven, an air elemental to dry my hair, and an earth elemental for my flowers indoors. They're alive and they need payment. When I'm gone out for a bit, they just scrounge around, but I gave them nice chunks of wood or fish or whatever as rewards for their services. They were cute little buggers, and damned handy.

Undead are reanimated by magic, and it is possible to make creepy composite undead. Like, one guy chopped up dead people and made a Death Sausage, adding teeth at one end. Golems are nonliving, although the same energy that animates the golem can also cause all organic material to live. A golem made from leaves and wood and grass blurs the line of life and death, but ultimately golems are considered animated matter not life.

Lastly there are chimera, which must be made from living bodies. Many of the patched-together ones wound up dying on the operating table. Without their juicy vital goodness, they just wobbled around half-heartedly. Zombie chimera are just no good, the nerves are already stiff from rigor mortis, and then the added challenge of merging bodies makes them worthless. That's why modern chimera typically are made by alchemy or lifeweaving magic to splice together living bodies seamlessly. Genes are merged too.

Of course, any decent student of genetic theory started with oozes. They were complex splice of bacteria and fungi. They ranged from droplets (slimes), to jellyfish-like critters with whip-like flagella (jellies), to those with a firm shape like a diamond or cube (pudding). They were squishy but couldn't be killed without destroying their core. They were a mess though, everywhere they went the left a sort of mold that I had to clean with bleach. These would be my front-line troops. Surely they would stop them. I set a Slimeborn named Dewdrop to lead them, picked more for her aptitude in bed than her courage or leadership ability. I trusted she would run away fairly quickly, but while she was there, she would give the oozes morale. As though most oozes had enough sentience to really have some a thing.

If not, I had beast chimera, hybrid chimera, and true chimera. My hybrid chimera were fishmen and batmen, the former I armed with crossbows and the latter due to their high agility I gave bladed weapons like swords, knives, and spears. These were my foot soldiers throughout the house. The beast chimera were more like tanks, they were big

and sturdy, and some had breath weapons. One type was a creature with the head of a snow leopard, the front hooves and torso of an ibex, and the back end of a snake. It could wrap itself around trees and it could do a peculiar hop-crawl that would be cute and funny, except for their ability to breathe frost. There were also those who had a head of a pig, midsection and wings of a hawk, and rear of a zebra. Due to their ability to fly around and their acid bite, they were dangerous enemies as well. Oh yes, and a three-headed cat that behaved as strategist for the other chimera.

And you may ask, what is a true chimera? Well, human beings are a composite of many genetic species, as scientists in the 20th century discovered when mapping them. There are a host of ideas from certain races, as many as 145 genes from 40 different animal species, which are then part of the makeup of humans along with their unique genes. A true chimera has no human genes at all, but enough animal genes to cobble together a being that can think, talk, and act as a human but had many of the advantages of the animals they were made from. I had only one of these, a woman I named Surrogate Lover # 2 (#1 was a being that I planned to give an artificial soul to, but the plan sorta kinda fell through when a demon betrayed me). She could sprout wings or claws or fangs, she could breathe water or air, and she had prehensile feet. But to a casual observer, she was a regular girl. She was a lover, but she was sterile like all artificial crossbreeds. Unlike a natural crossbreed, the chromosome number is unequal, so they cannot reproduce, even with another chimera of the same type. Not that they would manage to meet her. She was not for defense except as a last result. She was for my... entertainment, while the others took care of intruders. She was very entertaining...

NEVRAS

Ambrosia seemed to trust this sorcerer but I didn't even know him. But I trusted her, even when it seemed like she was trying to trick me, because the outcome was usually good. I supposed it might be possible that all of this training was just a waste of time, but even if that were the case, the fact is she did it to spend time with me. So since her intentions were good, I decided to ignore this possibility entirely and believe that she legit wanted us to train. This didn't mean, however, that I had my guard down. I fully expected traps within this mansion. What I didn't expect was to be attacked by creatures right as soon as I entered.

As soon as the door opened, oozes of all sorts rushed out. I hated jellies. In the past, when I tried to attack them, some of them had a powerful digestive system strong enough to corrode steel. I wasn't sure how my sword would hold up, but I decided to give it a try. I lunged at one of the jellies, slashing it towards its core. To my surprise the weapon was untouched. I looked at how the weapon got slimed though, and realized I would have to be careful with that heart-shaped pudding that wobbled slowly towards us, because it was substantially thicker. I had just enough time to think about this when I had to dodge a whip from the side. I looked around and noticed I had about thirty of these suckers to fight, all by myself. The others had their own critters to deal with.

Behind all of those, there was a Slimbeborn cheering them on, but she took one look at me, blushed, and puddled herself into a storm drain. We didn't pursue. Slimeborns could have all manner of emotions, including shyness, but the truth was that she was more dangerous than the others. There was no sense cornering her.

Ambrosia and Aqorm were working together against the slimes. There were a few of them, somewhere above a hundred or two. Lilith looked around for a bit, then decided to join them. Ambrosia, decided to turn her Conception tool into a big mallet, figuring that a good splatter would deal with them. She wasn't wrong, but well, you couldn't effectively swing such a thing like a sword, you pretty much had to swing it overhead like that, making her attacks slow but brutal. Luckily, the slimes didn't have anything caustic. They just attacked by bouncing at people, knocking them over and sliming them. The problem was, these things were unpredictable since they could do stuff like jump and stick to the ground to suddenly change direction, so she couldn't use her dodge technique. Aqorm wasn't much good against the slimes themselves but managed to keep Ambrosia from being body-slammed to a large extent. Lilith was the real star in this battle though, as her savage style of fighting involved slashing one slime to bits, stabbing another with

her tail, and grabbing her pet rock Christina to splatter a bunch of densely packed ones. Unfortunately, when the population got down to less than half, they started reproducing by fission. I looked at my own jellies, which I was making progress against by knocking them back with my shield, and dispensing each with sword techniques. They too were trying to reproduce! There was no end to this!

Michael, Zoe, and Azrael were working together against the pudding ooze. It was tough, because its thick body tended to protect its core from harm, and the three were having trouble agreeing what method would work the best against its body. I'd help out if I wasn't busy fending off my own critters.

Elias was alternating between healing and using alchemy. He had his brewing pot out and starting throwing something in water, then quickly shut the lid, and put it to “vibrate” mode. It rattled and shook, mixing whatever it was correctly. While he healed our acid burns, and the bruises we got from whips and body slams, the pot contained to rattle. Yet I had no idea what he was cooking.

ELIAS

As everyone knows, isopropyl alcohol kills both mold and bacteria, so it was very effective to something that is basically both. Essentially, unlike many living things which have a layer of skin covering them, oozes have only fat and water cell membranes so alcohol is able to bond to them. This exposes their cores, causing them to lose structure and dissolve. But I wasn't making isopropyl alcohol. I was brewing rum. The run had quickly fermented and distilled, and I decided to release the excess moisture by removing the stopper. A thick mist filled the air, and the pudding, jellies, and slimes all popped like large bubbles. I put the stopper back on, and after some time passed, I slowly eased off the pressure and bottled this elixir. We might have some of this later, but for right now, we had work to do. Alchemy was originally for this purpose, but it would wait.

The mansion was built of mostly wood and marble, but its owner didn't care for a lot of frills. The house was grand in size, but there was no Greek revival architecture, no chandeliers, no decorations to speak of except for a sky roof above our heads. It was like a log cabin had been turned into a mansion, plain to the point of oddity. There were two staircases leading upstairs, and three rooms and an open kitchen on the first floor. The floor in the lobby was cobblestone, great for pitfalls or traps. Lilith wandered over toward the kitchen, as I warned, “Hey watch where you...” she stepped on a pressure plate which released a giant boulder from above. “...step,” I finished. She absently raised her arm as if to rub her eyes, and the boulder shattered into pebbles. Lilith didn't even notice. She grabbed some chicken from the storage and cooked it in her hand, before tearing at it with her teeth. Seeing everyone shocked, she looked around and noticed the boulder fragments. “How did that get there?” she asked.

Carefully, we checked each room. The lower right room, an all-wood room, was the mansion's dining room. It had an long table with slats that could be removed and some lights that looked like modifications of the Glow Orb design. A cabinet held dishes of all sorts, and Ambrosia insisted that Lilith sit down to eat. She didn't really say how though. The women scrunched her feet and behind into the chair in a squat position, letting her tail wag behind her. The wooden shaker chair had slots where her tail could slip through, and we saw her munching away contentedly without a care in the world. A three-headed calico cat walked by, and demanded petting. These critters could sometimes behave as leaders for other chimera, but this one seemed harmless. Its heads each seemed to have a personality. The left head looked hungry all the time, knowing cats this head would probably only eat food that appeared fresh. The right head looked sleepy, and probably kept the rest of its body well-rested. This middle head was obviously the main head, it was friendly to family and to people who looked like they might like pets, but scared of strangers. It was grumpy if left alone, but also randomly nudged people with its head. We gave it a pet, rubbing near the ears and neck. It started leaning towards us with another head. Lilith petted the other head at the same time, and the third head meowed for attention. After this, the cat rolled over on her belly, and we rubbed that too.

The rest of us explored more of the house. I walked carefully, just in case anyone needed healing. Aqorm used her sharp eyes to spot traps. She pointed one on the floor

that was kinda cross-shaped, and then pressed down on it with her fingertips, pressing slightly on the left side. The trap apparently fired a volley of arrows from left to right at the space around the pressure plate. After it finished, she decided to test out whether there was any ammo left or whether the trap was completely sprung. She pressed this time on the right side of the switch. This time, arrows came from the opposite direction. "Everyone duck!" Aqorm said. She pressed the center, and the arrows flew from all directions. Searching around, Aqorm found four other rock panels that seemed able to be pressed, two long ones and two were round. She pressed the pressure plate up, up, down, down, left, right, left, and right. Then she hit two of the round stones and tried the long stone on the right. The raised stones sunk and we were able to pass the trapped area to our right. We could move freely again!

"Wait, how'd you know to do that exact pattern?" I asked. Aqorm explained, "Oh that? That's the secret code to the universe." We headed to the upper right room, which turned out to be a library. Most of his books appeared to be about time-space theory, strange rituals, or methods of making artificial life through golems and chimera. In one corner of the room was a diary. It seemed to be about his experiments. After his wife died, he started working on making lifeforms, and talking in depth about his deal with Belial and his motives for the deal. It was all very dry and scientific, and I read it as such. But when I looked up, there was not a dry eye, even Lilith who had just walked in after finishing her food. What's wrong? It was just a notebook with science formulas, why were they getting so emotional?

Leaving that area, we decided to check through the last room on the first floor, the one which had stone walls and a mithril door. I opened the door and was surprised to notice that the inside of both the door and the wall had bars reinforcing them. I looked around the room and saw test tubes, flickering lights, giant vats, beakers, and several tools like a bunsen burner, droppers, funnels, and the biggest forceps I'd ever seen. And then I saw a few chimera, but not friendly like the cat. I suddenly understood why this door had bars on it. These beasts were a blend of leopard/ibex/snake or pig/hawk/zebra. The flying pigs started flapping their wings to dive-bomb while the others hopped forward. Thinking quickly, I slammed the door shut, and I was about to lock it, when Michael said, "Wait. I'll fight them off." Confused, I said, "But... why? The room is well-barricaded, even if they rush the doors. It was obviously designed to keep these beasts in." Michael drew his sword, "Those things are abominations. They were created not by God but by man through twisted experiments."

And he was about to destroy them, when we were interrupted again. *Spare them, my servant Michael*, said God, *for I have ordained that even such beings shall have a soul. Mankind will be co-Creators with me, even those these things appear deformed*. Just like that, he sheathed his sword, and walked away from the area, without so much as a grunt of complaint.

We headed toward the stairs, but just as we came to a section between them, some sort of circle glowed with runes, and an alarm sounded. "Huh?!?" Ambrosia said, "I thought you said that you could detect traps!" Aqorm shook her head, as did I. I explained, "That's a magical circle made from sensing runes. When we stepped here, it sent an alarm whoever is hiding up here." And so, more chimera crawled out of the woodwork. These appeared to be a hybrid of fish and humans, or bats and humans. And they all had weapons. We were done for.

NEVRAS

The others have a difficult time with battles like this, fighting against long-ranged and quick fighters. Ambrosia and Elias largely stayed out of the way, Lilith got another snack, and Michael said something along the lines of not wanting it to be too easy for the group to win and went to the library to find some reading material. Meanwhile, Aqorm took out her knives and chucked them at a few of the fishmen, downing seven of them. The others started cocking their crossbows, and fired on us!

While only myself, Azrael, and Zoe were actively fighting beyond Aqorm's lucky throw, they didn't seem to care. Ambrosia got grazed by a shot, the arrow flying just past her shoulder. Elias moved to heal her, but then Elias got an arrow to the knee. And the

hip, and he got shot in the arm. Uh oh, this wasn't supposed to happen. If our healer died, we'd be in trouble! Besides which, Elias was a decent guy and didn't deserve this.

I knew my weapons from being in the military. The arrows would rain down slowly because unlike the average longbow, a crossbow was not designed to hold multiple arrows and took longer to set up. The advantage to a crossbow is higher draw-weight, and the bolts are usually metal, and it takes less strength and training on the part of the person using. But a mini-crossbow like they were using fires only small bolts, and doesn't have enough power to pierce decent armor. In a test of firing speed against a crossbow, a longbow could fire powerful shots every 5-6 seconds (about 10-11 times a minute), while either crossbow had a lot of setup and thus was closer to 6-7 times a minute. All of us got hit, but it didn't do much harm to me or Azrael since we wore armor and these were only mini-crossbows. Despite taking several arrows, Elias would be alright as long as he was treated properly.

We were in real danger, as the chimera creatures continued firing, and Azrael needed to heal multiple people at once. She could use Recover to heal everyone, but there were logistical issues, since she had to remove these bolts one by one while healing. If she made a barrier, she might not have enough mystic power to spare for healing everyone. Fortunately, seeming dumb luck saved everyone. When Elias got knocked back, somehow he landed right on a pressure plate. Unlike the rest of the traps, this one seemed to be designed in case projectiles were fired in this particular area. What a coincidence! Because of this “trap” we were able to avoid getting skewered by arrows, and Elias was able to stay inside this barrier to rest and recover.

In any case, a big dome of energy covered the area around us and screened out the other arrows. She looked around. Aqorm had no injuries, since as a half-elf, she was trained from birth to reflexively dodge arrows. And Lamarck was right, generations of doing something altered your genetics. Zoe, however had two arrows in her body, in her elbow and near her waist. Lilith and Michael were unhurt. I had blocked their attacks with my shield, and my armor would have lightened damage from attacks anyway. Azrael started to heal everyone. Before Azrael could do any healing though, she would have to heal herself, as she had a bolt in her stomach. If she were to lose consciousness, the barrier would fail, and most of us would die. Carefully but swiftly, she yanked the bolt out of her flesh, and healed herself before continuing. She needed to take a breather from the strain, but she managed to stay conscious during this time. She was very lucky, since where the area hit was near many internal organs, and just a bit closer and it wouldn't have mattered how fast she healed, she would be dead of blood poisoning before she started. Picking herself up, she started work on those that she could quickly heal, skipping me, Aqorm, Lilith, and Michael. Ambrosia only required a minor heal, and then she moved on to Zoe. She pulled out her arrows a lot more carefully than her own, and healed these one at a time. Elias, on the other hand, despite being last to be healed and having three distinct arrow wounds, she just pulled these out in rapid succession and gave him a generalized healing. Elias stayed to do some healing on himself, since he didn't trust this rushed treatment. Being largely done with healing, Azrael drank a mana potion after all of that and sat down.

Zoe had a longbow, but rarely used it in favor of her scythe. She pulled it out now though. She had to step outside the barrier, as did Aqorm, since arrows and techniques seemed to get screened from both directions. Aqorm managed to take three down in rapid succession with her knives, before dodging out of the way of a stray crossbow shot. I stayed inside, since my techniques would probably destroy the place, and since I was mainly a short-ranged fighter otherwise. I needed to conserve my strength for other fights. The two of them were unprotected from ranged attacks, but it didn't seem to matter. Zoe fired with enough speed that she drilled a hole through one of them, hitting the wall behind upstairs, before she was even fired on. She plucked another arrow from her quiver, and hit another one, also killing it instantly. She did this three more times. While all of this was happening, Aqorm pulled out her Golden Bow that we had gotten as a result of helping that lady out. The crossbow was designed to string itself using a bar of which pulled the string back when the crossbow cocked, and a sort of hook to keep it in place. She placed the arrow just ahead of the string, folded the bow to pull the string

back, pressed forward a small tab that acted as a safety, fitted the bolt all the way back where the string was, and pulled the trigger. Aqorm didn't have bolts as big or as powerful as Zoe's and they had a standard bodkin head, rather than the compound head of Zoe's arrows. They were also shorter and lighter, because it was a mini-crossbow. That is not to say that her weapon was anything like theirs. This is called the Golden Bow because of its color, not because it was made of gold. Actually, it was made of adamant, a material of golden color that was known for its extreme durability and the ability of weapons made from it to pierce hard substances. The strings of the bow themselves were made from adamant, as was the body, as were the bolts, and it was able to take much more pressure, allowing it to penetrate even stone golems as though they were made of cotton. The bolt, though small, drilled right through on of these fishmen from mouth to tail, killing it instantly, and hit something on the other side of the wall upstairs. We heard a high-pitched scream from another room, then rustling like someone or something was leaving the room. Zoe finished off the others, but some angry critters flew at us. These ones were hard to hit with a bow and arrow, so I figured it was my turn.

Azrael stayed inside the barrier as she had basically spent a ton of mystic power healing everyone, and didn't want to be injured again. Aqorm and Zoe went inside briefly to switch out their weapons to their regular ones, and rushed outside Zoe was managed to catch quite a few in a combo of Water and Lightning magic, but she spread out a wide net because they had dodged seven or eight single-targeting magic attacks, and to make it effective took more mystic power than she anticipated. She had also used a fair amount of unsuccessful attacks against that pudding earlier. She was magically exhausted, and Azrael looked like she was that way too. The two of them slept, backs to each other, while those recovering guarded them. It was just Aqorm and me left fighting. Aqorm was fast enough to keep up with these bat creatures herself, as long as the odds were close to even, but I was having trouble. My swings were fast, but it wasn't a solid hit even when I managed to hit these creatures. When I tried to use techniques, they heard me calling out my attack, and quickly dodged or took to the air. I needed something fast, which I could do without calling it out. I needed an answer like Silent Spells for casters, some technique that was designed just as simple very fast strike. Fortunately for me, the nature of techniques is that they are adaptable, so I simplified the concept Speed Slash into one even faster attack that I could use without saying it aloud, and decided this would be known as Swift Strike. A bat leaped towards me, and I surprised it by suddenly raising the speed of my swing, fast enough that it was cut. I cut it again with an uppercut swing, also at much higher speed. I dealt with another which was flying over me preparing to swoop down and stab me with his knife by jumping in the air and delivering a slash, cutting this one in half. Aqorm used geomancy, using the wood from the area she was standing to create a mass of vines that impeded these bat things. After this, we made short work of these creatures.

With my sword, I cleared away these vines and we put them in the kitchen chimney to be burned later. We all walked upstairs. The second floor had two rooms, the one those bats came from, and a second one on the right. Most of the group walked into the bigger room on the left, except for Lilith and Michael, who weren't team players. The room had some bureaus and shelves that we could search, but we were worried about some other critter coming in, so we closed the door.

Some of the book shelves taught us more about what Yazim Jianne had been researching, how he had managed to summon Belial, and there were even notes about what he had in the last few days. Hoping to find out more, I opened a desk, and heard a strange clicking sound. No matter, I found some more useful things in this desk, like an architectural layout for the mansion. I realized the room right next to this one had a staircase to the third floor, and that there was a master bedroom up there. I also found a key. Odd, when I reached toward the desk to close it, I had to stand back a bit, almost like the furniture was closer than a few second ago. But that was impossible, the desk was bolted to the floor! In fact, even the book shelves were. Nothing was moving at all, unless the room itself did, floor and all. I looked at the house schematics, and it noted some of the traps we had encountered earlier in a sort of shorthand that was only understandable later. This room for instance, had a symbol x near the table I had just

touched in the room, mentioning something about opening it a certain way. It also had strange arrows extending from the walls on the map. I looked behind me briefly and the bookcase opposite me also seemed closer. Probably, it was just my imagination. The others seemed scared about something. The room was kind of cramped, but I didn't see any immediate danger.

YAZIM JIANNE

As you might have guessed, this room slowly compacts up to about 6 feet or so high using a false ceiling. It has comparatively high ceilings so my bat people can rest on the ceiling, but the walls continue to close until crushing others within the room. And no, there aren't any spikes, nor is it so tight as to crush those within to pulp. Instead, when the trap is triggered, the door locked, and the room remained tight for about an hour or two before unlocking, rending them unconscious from lack of air. I wasn't cruel enough to suck out all the air in the room, which would make them dead in a matter of minutes. A silent alarm notified me that someone was caught in the trap, and I typically either used them in my experiments or fed them to my chimera. But no more of that now, I had been trying to turn over a new leaf lately. It's just that people were threatening me by invading my home. I had a right to do with them what I wanted, after all. They were trying to attack me.

If somehow people climbed over the wall, they had enough air for at least six hours or so and could technically survive until the trap reset. But this too was a trap. There was a motion sensor just above the wall line, and if it noticed anyone, it would send out a supersonic frequency that woke up my bat people. There's no way they would escape this room. Even if they did, my house had so many traps, even I couldn't remember them.

Also, that barrier switch they activated was no coincidence. I had discovered another me setting it up one day. This Yazim Jianne was from the future. He said that he was a time traveler from later this year. Apparently, after the group was drilled through with holes, Belial had decided to go ahead and merge the New Earth with the Realm of Void. This Yazim Jianne came back to sabotage my carefully laid traps. Worse, that her changed the timeline meant he didn't even exist anymore so I couldn't even punish myself for disobedience later. I hate Future Me. I mean, I knew that they needed to succeed in order to stop Belial. But still, I had built this house to be safe from the outside world. What were they thinking, coming in here when I was still mourning and meddling?

NEVRAS

It may surprise you know that I have mild claustrophobia, which is why I was in denial of what was happening to the room for so long. But then, who really wants to be in a cramped tiny space anyway?

The walls grew closer, then closer, and even closer. Furniture moved with the floor since was bolted to it, yet somehow the books stayed on the shelf. We tried to stay away from taller furniture as that would completely trap us, instead getting on top of low tables. More troubling, a solid platform just above the bookcases on either side was pulling out. Even if we somehow managed not to be crushed, we would probably suffocate if the top was closed on us. Aqorm, being a half-elf, managed to climb over the bookcase and on the platform. “Grab hold,” she said as she pulled me and Ambrosia up, one at a time. She was stronger than she looked, I guess. Once the two of us were up there, we helped Elias, Zoe, and Azrael up. Only, somehow or other, Azrael stumbled and fell below. The false ceiling closed around her.

ZOE

I was not about to let Azrael suffocate to death. The rule of three said, “You can survive three minutes of severe bleeding, without breathable air , or in icy water; you can survive three hours in a harsh environment (extreme heat or cold); you can survive three days without drinkable water; or you can survive three weeks without edible food.” The room had some air still in it, but it wouldn't last for more than a few hours. I had little time to save her, so I was tense as anything. And yet, I decided to calm myself. This was when my Sage trance was most effective, even though I hadn't fully mastered it yet. My eyes closed, and suddenly they opened fully, and I was completely transformed. My eyes

filled with the color of gold. My hair turned an intense color of silver, and I stepped hard on a section of ceiling, unexpectedly breaking a large section around my feet. I knocked down some of the extended wall sections on the way down, crumbling them to rubble. Azrael, free from being pinned, stepped forward and caught me. I was losing consciousness, since I hadn't really recovered from all the exertion earlier.

This shouldn't happen. My Sage abilities don't use mystic power, and my body heals itself by absorbing the natural energy known as *senju*. There is usually a time limit, but as long as I am outside, I can recover from exhaustion and even fairly bad wounds by going into my Sage trance. And of course, beefing up my physical ability and being able to see and touch runes easily is nothing to scoff at easier. But all of this assumes that I have access to natural energy. I looked around at the carved stone, the manmade metal and glass, and the artificial wood of this furniture. I had made a mistake.

I would definitely pass out here. But it looked liked I wouldn't suffocate down here. I woke to find myself safe, and Azrael was with me. What had happened?

AZRAEL

While Zoe slept, I saw a fishing line come down from above the false ceiling. I was strongly reminded of a Buddhist parable, in which a violent criminal steps aside for one small spider before becoming caught and executed. In the Afterlife, the Buddha sent a strand of spider's web to pull this wicked man up, but seeing others try to come with him, he struggled against them and the thread broke leaving him down there. This story was a reminder that while the Christ offered Grace to humans in regard to the Afterlife, how you ought to try to treat other creatures as you would want to be treated. In other versions of the story, the evil person gave a beggar an onion, so strands of that... anyway, basically the same story. So I imagine anything would do, not just a spider. I wasn't going to make the mistake of the criminal. I sent Zoe up first, wrapping her body in fishing line. Then, wrapped it around myself, as the others helped Ambrosia pull me up.

We were stuck here for awhile, so we called Lilith and Michael for help, and I heard, "Oh, all right," coming from outside the door. Without effort, she casually tore the locked door off its hinges, and shattered all the extended wall portions. "Okay everyone," she said, "come on out!" Carefully, we climbed back down to the tables and such below. I made it outside while carrying her. She was fine now.

Zoe awoke, and was safe in my arms. She was too cute while she was sleeping to simply wake up, so I told her to rest in my arms. We stopped in the hallway to rest while the others continued toward Yazim Jianne's stronghold. While the others were gone we curled around each other like two leopard slugs, exploring each other blindly, smelling each other, and tasting each other. Thankfully, they returned much later, not when we were naked and holding each other closely. It wasn't sexual. We just needed to be close.

YAZIM JIANNE

This cannot be! Curses! Foiled again! And other villainous cliche sayings! Scrying the whole event in my crystal ball, I looked around and noticed that they had also taken care of my fishmen, my batmen, and my various breeds of gelatinous creatures. And all they had to do was storm upstairs, and they would kill me as well.

Surrogate Lover # 2 sensed my fear and anxiety, and told me, "Come to bed dear, there's no sense fighting people who want to see you." You know, she had a point, if these people were decent, they would listen to reason. If not, I may as well die like I wanted, killed while having the best sex ever. And so, I set about tearing off Surrogate Lover # 2's clothing. As she was an experiment, I hadn't given her fine clothes, just a men's shirt, short skirt, and long lab jacket. She didn't even had undergarments, as I wasn't going to give her Sarai's stuff.

As a chimera, she was appealing, in a slightly odd way. She had long healthy-yet-unkempt chestnut hair that extended to her ankles, yellow eyes like a cat, and her ears were very soft. I nibbled on them while I pulled off her shirt and jacket, exposing her perky breasts to me while I also sucked on those. She was obviously aroused, because she groaned softly, and scratched my back. The claws came out. I would need a healer later. I pulled off her skirt, and the lab shoes that I had given her as my research assistant, and then I led her to my bed.

She was an animal. We lay with each other, having some rough sex, as every now and then she'd forget that I was her master, and animal impulses would take over. I got bitten, scratched, and kicked rather frequently, and somehow made it out alive. I had rougher sex anyway, when I was with Sarai.

The mark of a villain with regard to sex is that they have pleasure themselves but deny it for their lover, stopping them from coming. But I wasn't about to do that with a wild girl who could tear my head off if she got upset. I settled for the other mark of a villainous lover, to completely ignore anyone trying to interrupt their sex. And so, when Ambrosia's little group came along, I just kept on until I climaxed. Then I kept on until she orgasmed. Four times.

Finally, I looked up, and I addressed them. “So? Are you here to kill me?” I asked. Aqorm answered, “We weren't gonna, but you kinda made us impatient, so maybe?” Ambrosia hushed her, then shook her head, “We need your help, actually. You can use sorcery, and besides which we got this Transport Coin and wanted to have it altered.” She showed it to me, and I knew. She had in fact returned to the right timeline. This was the Ambrosia I met in the Eternal Town.

I took a closer look at the Transport Coin. The original design allowed living and nonliving items to be called from other dimensions temporarily. It was a simple summoning spell that had virtually no accuracy when calling from the same dimension. I don't remember making it for her, but obviously some point in the near future this *will* happen in her past. That means, I would send some female follower of mine back to the original timeline, according to Ambrosia. Now that we were all together, however, I had a chance to properly look at this.

It appeared some sorcerers had attuned this Transport Coin to sync better with the ship and the dragon. This was obviously a hack job though, so I worked through the process of resetting the enchantment. When most wonder-workers enchant things, it locks up their mystic power, but sorcery works differently. The ritual did need a source of power, but I had a chart of ley lines, and the nearest one was inches from my doorstep. Since ley lines could gradually renew energy, I had no need to worry.

Our group made the trip to a nearby canyon, where an exact location contained all the energy I needed. The Transport Coin was a blank slate, able to attune to two objects of my choosing and to summon them correctly this time, drawing them to the location of the Coin. Ordinarily, after using the ritual, I would then need to locate their dragon Bahamut and the exact ship, and attune to them to complete the ritual. However, I already had rough outlines based on their meddling, so recopied all information into one notebook shortly before the ritual. All the words from the notebook started flowing out of the pages and merged into a single custom rune. I did the ritual using ley lines as planned, and linked them up without ever having seen either the dragon or the ship.. Moving to a beach, I used the Transport Coin and I was suddenly staring at a giant ship. We were done. I would be traveling with this group soon.

CHAPTER 8

In which the world begins to develop independently of the Council.

THE WORLD

While the group was having an adventure of sorts, the Council falling brought unforeseen consequences. In its absence, a group of seven men made up of the most wealthy or politically ambitious (or both) calling themselves Red Dragon conspired to divide this world into ten regions. These regions had no consideration for town borders, but rather just trampled over the national identities of each town. The nations were eager to strike out on their own apart from the influence of the Council, like a pregnant lady longing to give birth, yet the Red Dragon with ten horns and seven heads was threatening to do away with such nations. They weren't elected, and they couldn't even get overthrown since most people didn't even know they had taken over! But to those who did were told that Red Dragon was a humanitarian organization. They made themselves seem like a peacekeeping organization, when actually they were more like a protection

racket. If they refused to pay, riots or other calamities would mysteriously start in their area. As long as town mayors paid up, the effect of this shadow governors was relatively minor. Or so it seemed...

Taxes were raised, and income tax returned. Schools that before had posters which said «Be your own person» «Respect freedom in others, and you will be free» or «In God we trust» now said stuff like «Obey the rules» «If you see something, say something» and «Bullied by email? Delete it and burn your computer.» Society had gone from a largely libertarian system to one where people were encouraged to be censors, snitches, and follow senseless rules. Of course, this system couldn't really support itself, because human beings hate this crap. Riots broke out, poverty spread, and crime became prevalent, because now there was law and order. And in the outskirts, there was digging.

Normally, digging for technology and ancient artifacts was a sort of unspoken taboo with the Council active, but once they were gone, golems were set to work. This is not supposed to mean that the Council wanted to suppress history. Quite the opposite, regular citizens who went to schools learned nearly 14000 years of history, and some scholars knew more. Technology on the other hand, was viewed as dangerous unless introduced slowly. The reason behind this is called the Black Box theory.

The Black Box is as follows, a square object finds its way to... let's say, chimps. Those who find it, figure out that pressing a button or pulling a lever will do something like toasting bread, refining copper, or lighting a room. Besides splitting it apart with a rock, which will break the object, the chimpanzees have no real way of understanding what they are looking at. In the same way, as technology enters assembly lines or becomes automated, it keeps general knowledge of how to create things lost, and materials become increasingly difficult to acquire. Suddenly, something as easy as a toaster becomes lost. With the addition of centuries, people would only understand how to make devices from looking at a completed model that are sort of like the original. The higher the technology, the more pronounced this effect. They dug some of this technology up, but struggled to figure out how to use it initially. This theory meant that while people were experimenting with the limits of technology such as nuclear weapons, they might accidentally ruin or destroy the world if they built something wrong.

They found a few old scrolls from before the Great Phoenix War, when the technology of the original Earth was still vaguely known, and they found bits and pieces of machines. Some fired laser or bursts of plasma. Some seemed ready to go somewhere but for the archaeologists not knowing how to turn them on. These objects were collected, sanded in some cases, and cataloged by function. Others were saved to see if they could be pieced together with other machines.

Apparently, at one point, technology used coal, then oil for quite some time, and then electrical power fueled machines, leaving it up to the latest power source how clean the energy was. This lasted for awhile, until people finally figured out how to produce clean equivalence engines (short for **matter-energy equivalence**, the process of turning matter into energy rather than radioactive fission). Lastly, came perpetual energy. Unfortunately for the world at large, it would take some time for people to understand these latter devices. So like inventors of the time just before the Great Phoenix War broke out, the technology they adapted was very half-baked. Rather than high-quality and clean technology, it could best be described as nuclear steampunk. The vehicles and devices used very dirty (in both senses of the word) coal-burning engines to move gears that basically shattered the uranium inside with a mallet. The resulting powder was also heated up, generating some energy, but also oxidizing with the air. Generally, uranium air is probably not a good thing, and uranium air with coal ash was worse. Crops died and people got sick just from testing the devices out. And these engines also tended to melt themselves down from extreme heat of these reactions, making them rather clunky, but they worked well enough for armies to consider using them. It is important to keep in mind that such devices also had little to no lead or other shielding, and as such were a massive headache in the days to come both in terms of radioactive disposal and in terms of treating those affected. At some point during human history, a working theory of energy use was developed, called the Renewability Principle. After having power sources gradually run out, one by one, they developed safe versions of renewable energy

(having learned from the hype of solar and wind energy, after having graphene from solar panels pollute the water, and wind energy kill birds in large numbers) using a principle that “any energy source worth using should be taken in a way that it could continuously be drawn.” Applying this theory, they found green energy that actually was green, and not simply hyped by self-righteous pricks. But these archaeologists knew nothing of this, and cared even less. They just kept digging, seeking more treasures.

In addition to guns, propulsion, bombs of questionable safety and worth, and engines that were poorly put together, some medicine, agricultural technology, and a number of labor-saving devices also came to light. There was apparently one that cooked pancake batter into a square grid, and another that was called ROO_ _ _ (the other letters had scratched off) which was a rounded disc that seemed to be put on the floor for some purpose. The archaeologists digging these things weren't always sure how to use these devices though, and until a power source that didn't give everyone black lung and fallout poisoning was developed, some of these were put on development hiatus.

These devices were interesting but the lack of oversight, or rather the overabundance of the wrong sort of oversight, meant that even a harmless food grinder turned healthy meat and potatoes into something so processed that it couldn't be said to be nutritious. For the sake of progress, all previous restraints went out the window, with none to put the brakes on violations of ethics. Genetic engineering was already a fetish with sorcerers, but under this pursuit of “progress” it developed to extremes in strange creatures.

All technology has pros and cons. With the discovery of old tech, alchemy also improved. Piping systems for carrying water, cheaper methods of creating and spreading cement roads, and other such things began to become options for progress. Since the fission engines weren't exactly doing them many favors, they researched transporting energy of ley lines through metal conduits called leystreams. But easier transportation during wartime also means enemy troops can invade more quickly and easily, and more energy for devices means the water and soils vitality was being stripped. Water became stagnant, and crops died as readily as with radiation. This in turn converted fertile into dry cracked deserts. These cracks in turn caved in creating potholes in the soil. Worse, these holes in the earth sometimes broke through negative energy lines; zombies rose from the ground, and feasted on the living. Good times.

CHAPTER 9

In which the group goes out of their way for fine music and good food.

AMBROSIA

Exploring Opening some more, we discovered a young girl near a lake in the upper corner of town. “Hi there,” she pleaded, “I wonder if you could help me out? You see, I traded away my Crystal Trophy. An old Japanese woman showed me this stuff called sushi, and said that if I give her it, she'd teach me.” I asked, “So what should we do to get it back?” She shook her head, “That might be difficult to get back though. Kinda. Sorta.” I said flatly, “What.” She hastily replied, “But you can help me reclaim it! Get me some rice, seaweed, and some seafood. Then come back.” I picked up some of that shark meat from earlier, and then I kinda sorta went to a nearby farm in the dead of night, and took a little bit of rice from the corner. It's not stealing, it's gleaning! Completely okay. As for seaweed, I turned my fishing pole into a seaweed rake, and started skimming the pond where the little girl stood. She chopped it up, scaring me with her knife skills, then prepped the rice, then added the shark meat. “Okay,” she said after making a plate, “looks like you got it. Deliver this to the old woman in Goji, will you?”

Goji?!? That's halfway around the world! We stuffed the sushi in our Preserver, and boarded our ship. The water was rough, but we had experience sailing around the world several times to get where we wanted. After several weeks, we arrived in Goji, tired and worn out. Next time, as long it was something non-perishable, we'd take Bahamut.

AZRAEL

We arrived in Goji, and I explored my old haunts once again. While the others searched for lady fitting the description, I went inside an old dilapidated house that had

been my home growing up. My mother, being one of those women who simply mated and forgot any ties with her family, had the decency at least to carry me to term, but thereafter left me at the doorstep. Like any child, I cried. Loudly. The priest at run-down temple which has now fallen into disuse, noticed me. He fed me, he clothed me, and he loved me. He was a priest by trade and knew Exorcism, so he taught me to read, and how to meditate. My power grew, but power is a doubled-edged sword. As I got stronger, there was a greater chance that spirits would come to steal my unused spiritual energy. He taught me sutras and symbols to defend myself with. And yet, the dead rose in this town, and they were after the power of those who performed Exorcism. Any who were easy prey would be consumed in order to make the ghosts stronger. I was taught Exorcism to defend myself, and at age 8, I exorcised my first spirit. I was a professional myself by the age of 14, earning money to be split with the temple to cleanse evil spirits. I was successful, I was powerful, and I was fairly rich. Yet something was missing, because I was lonely. I desperately needed someone to keep me company, and yet there was nobody in town my own age I could confide in.

I was brought out of my reverie by a warm hand, and Zoe motioned me to follow her. “C'mon, slowpoke, hurry up,” she teased. As if I wouldn't follow her anywhere. Finally, we had found that lady.

AMBROSIA

The woman in Goji was a crazy old lady with cats. We offered her our plate of sushi, and explained why we were here. She giggled as she fed it to her pets, “Oh yes, I remember now. That fool of a girl gave away a Crystal Trophy like it was nothing. Only a few of them exist, and you probably can only get one by beating the game without saving. Trading that for the cheap ability to make sushi is absurd. Well, anyway, I don't have it. As I was basking in my deal, some giant monkey grabbed the thing. All I managed to keep was the banana he dropped. See if you can trade this back.” I took a look at the banana. It was completely huge, roughly the size of her cats. I couldn't imagine the size of a bunch. This was the legendary King Banana I'd heard about.

Since the old lady had no real idea of which way this critter went, Zoe volunteered. “Let me do this!” she said. Grabbing the banana and boarding the ship, she started to strip below deck. Then she started to get on all fours. Then she started to growling and her teeth became more canine, and hair started growing on her fingers and toes while they became more paw-like, her body fat including that of her breasts started to be covered over by sinew and muscle, and a tail grew out of her behind. If she wasn't making wolf sounds, she would probably be screaming from the pain right now. Her face around where her nose was lengthened, her natural hair on her head receded and was replaced by fur, until finally she was just a big alpha wolf. We raised our weapons as if to hurt her if necessary, but instead she started sniffing the banana, and then abruptly barked. “Is she gonna kill us all?” I asked. Azrael shook her head. “I've heard about this. I didn't think anyone in our group could do it though.” Nevras looked nervous, “Skin Magic? Like those creepy assassins that can pretend to be everyone?” He would have encountered some of those. Azrael shook her head, “This is a Beast Form. She has control of this, and she's a real wolf.” I was concerned, “There aren't risks, are there? I mean, she seemed like she was in a lot of pain. Could she get stuck, forget who she is, or just go crazy or something?” She shook her head, “She'll be alright. I think. Anyway, let's let her work!” Zoe nodded after I suggested that, and Azrael gave her a pet on the shoulders.

Zoe sniffed for quite awhile, then she seemed to have memorized the scent, tried to climb the stairs up to the top deck. Unfortunately, the steps were too close together, and she toppled over. We tried to lift her, but after she panicked and her legs started flopping all over the place, and she was too heavy to lift anyway. “Dammit, Zoe! Turn back, already.” She whined, and howled a bit, and forced herself back into a human form. “Owww ow oww!!! It hurts,” she said. “What hurts?” I asked. She pointed to everything. Walking up the steps, she was told to do it again, but she shook her head hard and said, “I can't right now.” I asked, “Why not?”

YAZIM JIANNE

Barring some modesty reasons, since the boat had still not left port, there was a pretty

clear reason why she couldn't use it again. Self-transmutation had a toll on the body that took getting used to. Remember how I talked about flight and how it was easier in terms of mystic points to turn into bird than just prevent falling because of disbelief? Well, it's even easier to turn into a bird when slipping inside a bird costume. Doing it without one was a strenuous process. Plus it's just more comfortable slipping into a bird suit.

Unless she had done this frequently and her body was used to this process, she'd be basically crunching up her bones, stretching muscles, or rearranging fat cells. If it's done by a real amateur, this risks permanently hurting the body. Zoe wasn't that, but since she probably only used this on rare occasions since animal transformations aren't really more powerful than the animal itself, and it was probable that she had done this less than five times in her life. It showed, she seemed to be taking awhile and it looked painful.

"I'll do this," I said. They had seen what I had done with the Transport Coin. But besides making enchantments in a fundamentally different way from most casters, we could also make self-collapsing enchantments. Such a thing would only last a week at most without a redo, but for our purposes this was best. I advised the group to instead take Bahamut, and we hefted the large fruit and the limping Druid on her. Before we took off, I quickly made an enchantment, writing with my finger, «傳染的神奇規則 .»

A strange yellow mist extended from the banana, showing our way to our quarry. Bahamut tracked it rather quickly to a palmetto growing just northeast of Galaxia. Landing nearby managed to completely terrify the abhorrent thief, and it fled for the hills. Or, it would have, if I had not restrained it with my 1st level Minor Temporal Binding. What a weak creature! Even a larger monkey could have struggled out of this, but it was almost totally paralyzed while we tried to interrogate the gibbering beast. Thankfully, Zoe, while currently crippled, was not totally worthless, for she had the ability to talk to animals. Its speech was clear enough, it gave us a bag of "shiny stuff" or iron pyrite, in exchange for our enormous banana.

When we got to town however, nobody seemed to know anything about it. We searched for quite some time, until finally it was obviously I and not someone else (okay, maybe it was Nevras) who noticed a coffin and a sign that said, «Please come back at night, I'm sleeping.» Acting on a hunch, we decided to turn in until the evening. A girl in a long black cape with looked at us with hypnotic eyes, but contrary to a certain Flock of Seagulls song, she had tawny hair and auburn eyes. She was a vampire, and fairly well behaved from the looks of it. I assume she was on tomato juice if she wasn't biting.

While vampires do crave blood, they can get it from rare meat just as easily as a human. They can also get the red pigments they crave from vegetables; these don't fill them the same way as real blood, but they manage. They didn't necessarily have to make more vampires either. Vampires are able to control their racial abilities after all. A vampire could only make a new vampire by pressing their fingers to an area they had just bit, and saying the words "**ערפד** " in which case those runes would flash on the creature's neck for about a day. After this, the person would become a vampire. Also, there was always a choice, the person bitten would begin to hear words inside their head about why they should become a vampire, but they could simply refuse. If they refused, the runes would break apart, and the bite mark would start to heal. If they accepted, the bite mark never healed, and their skin became a sort of porcelain color, and a parasite would burrow inside their body, constantly demanding they drink blood. This creature was a symbiote, giving them power and immortality, but its price was constant feeding. That doesn't stop vamps from convincing people they don't have a choice though.

Honestly, while many people are like "Kill the vamp!" I am not very concerned about them, since I can't be hypnotized by one because my heart belongs to another. No woman I know of can replace Sarai, so I pretty much just chat with vampires like regular people. I asked her, "Is this bag of fool's gold yours?" She nodded, "Yes, that's mine. But I don't want it back. You are searching for the Crystal Trophy? If you want more information, give me some Aurum instead."

Aurum was another name for gold nuggets, to be distinguished from the Gold that was coins. We had money, but a bag of Aurum? That was crazy. Elias suggested when we were out of earshot, "If we can find a decent alchemist, we can transmute what we already have." After a moment's though, Ambrosia said, "Hey wait, I know of an

alchemist. And he'll do it for cheap. He's in Ghobli, though." Apparently Nevras knew this guy, because after a moment's thought, recognition turned into nervousness and fear. "Surely you can't mean..." Ambrosia smiled, "Relax. It'll just be you and me doing this. The others won't be involved." Nevras shook his head, "That is **not** what I'm worried about. That guy probably sent Sera and Phim after us! He'll kill me!" She smiled again, "Relax~ I won't let him hurt you."

And so it was that we made another trip, this time to the market town of Ghobli. Ambrosia ordered us to stay near the dragon until they came back. Nevras looked visibly upset, "Ambrosia, how could you! We didn't even bother running away that time! We let him do it. And the look on his face..." Ambrosia explained, "We had to. If we tried to bargain and run this time, he would send the ninjas after us. We needed to make sure that he treated us right this time, and that meant keeping our promise." Nevras mumbled something I couldn't catch, "But dressing me up as girl, and making me have sex with him! I'm just lucky that when he looked under my dress, he said we could go free and didn't decide to molest me! Seriously, why did you do that, Ambrosia?" She shrugged, "All's well that ends well." She held up a bag of Aurum.

Flying back, we stayed just outside town until nightfall, then asked her again. This time, her face brightened, "A client made me a nice offer. The souls of an entire town. You be careful, and offer a nice gift or the critter might try to eat you too. Here, give it Candy. And I'll be taking this." We wound up with a lozenge. I was done. I told the others I was waiting on the ship until they figured stuff out.

AMBROSIA

Following the directions of our sweet vampire guide, we headed southeast of Hinata, where we saw a catgirl sitting down, mewling, and licking herself. She took one look at the lozenge, and asked, "Whoa, is that Candy? Gimme some!" I knew she might take it and tell us nothing, so I pushed, "First tell us about the Trophy." She mewed in frustration, then said, "Some crazy girl in a big town gave me massive amounts of Candy for it. She said she could rest easier knowing she had such a valuable item." She paused, "Here give her this Soft Pillow. It's always helped me sleep." She did look well-rested. I took her Pillow.

The only big town I knew of was Kushiyama, so we wandered around there for awhile, until I noticed a blond girl with deep black circles around her eyes. It looked like she hadn't slept in days! She talked in a slow and listless way, barely concentrating on what she was about to say. It was almost like someone who started writing a novel and stayed up night after night trying to finish as many pages as possible in about a few years, until at last they began to write stuff that was nonsense and/or filled with typos. She muttered, "Wel-come..." I told her, "Here's a pillow, please use it." I watched as she grabbed for it slowly with the lack of response of someone about to pass out, but then I interrupted her, "but first, could you tell me what happened to a certain Crystal Trophy?" I had to poke her a few times to get her to talk as she wobbled, halfway in between consciousness, "I thought... if I... had the... Trophy I would... be able... to sleep..." She paused, so I asked, "To sleep better?" She shook her head, "No... to sleep... I drank some of this covfefe, and now... I can't. Not ever. It worked... for awhile... but then... this... cat... it stole... the Trophy. " She continued, "The king... saw it too... he should... tell more if... you... give him... something." I asked, "Could you be more specific please?" She shrugged with the energy of everything else, "I don't... know... give my coffee... to someone who likes it... they should... be able... to come up... with a... gift."

I rested her head on the Soft Pillow, and got her to sleep some. Sorta. After this, we talked with King Yama and discovered that he would only discuss this matter if he had an Aluminum Can. Apparently, he had some special use for one. Since we didn't have one, we went to a trader of coffee, and showed him our Magic Coffee. He was willing to offer anything in exchange, including Gold coins of finest Phoenix mint. But we refused. Think of that poor suffering girl who would never see her Trophy again! Instead, I demanded to have an Aluminum Can. He looked at me blankly, "Really?!? Our coffee sometimes comes in those when it isn't that Magic Coffee stuff. It's cheap crappy metal. Why would anyone want this?" I shrugged. The mission had become an obsession, but I wanted to see the end result.

Delivering the can to King Yama, he told me, "Oh my, is that...? Yes it is! Now I can

talk with the other kings from here..." He started to fit metallic wire in the aluminum can, and prepped to start talking with other rulers. Ummm, why didn't he just use a cellphone? Regardless, we were about to leave when I reminded him, "Oh right, what about the Trophy?" King Yama explained, "Head to the base of Tsukuyomi Mountain. There you'll find a sick man." He gave me a small brown bag, then continued, "Give him these medical herbs, and he should give you something to trade for that."

Having a firm lead, we flew over to this mountain and indeed noticed a man laying on his side with what looked like indigestion or something. So we gave him our herbs, slowly brewing them as tea, and set the cup in front of him. Drinking the mixture, his stomach settled over the next hour, and he sat up and talked to us. He explained, "A cat took it from me, warning me to not focus on worldly things." I smirked, "Wait, he told you not to focus on worldly things, but here he is, stealing your stuff." He smiled, "Yeah, I noticed this too. In any case, I found this rare Sage Peach to trade him for his Trophy."

And so, we once again began the obnoxiously arduous path up the mountain. As before, the lush green hillside gave way to crags, and then icy mountain. But this time we had better gear and were better prepared. I turned my fishing pole into a long and durable rope of some blue cord, and I tied it around Lilith. Her strong body and sharp claws scrambled up the mountain ignoring the ice, and before long we made it up the peak. Of course, once again there was a large gorge in front of us on the path to the floating island. Even after explaining that this gap was a Paradigm that depended on our personal belief, Lilith refused to try. "Maybe you don't remember," she said, "but I'm a demon. Most magic doesn't work on us, and because of how I am, having strong belief probably wouldn't work. I'll fall right through!" Michael volunteered to expedite things, and just flew me across, which was a real time-saver. I showed the Sage Peach to this cat, who ate it hungrily, saying "Omm nom nom" as he did. Peaches were in the apricot family so he could technically eat this as long as he avoided the pit, but he would be better off with the sushi from earlier. At once, he was transformed, no longer appearing as a cat, but as an old man in sack cloth. He told me, "I no longer have the Trophy. Give this Note to the little girl explaining matters." I turned to leave, beginning to be frustrated. "Wait," he said, "tell that Druid to come over here. I wish to teach her to master her Sage trance." I pointed to Zoe, and made a motion for her to come over. Her heart and soul were disciplined, and her belief was pretty strong. She made it over, no problem, despite this being her first try. "Tell her what you said to me," I told the old master. Lao Tzu asked Zoe, "So then, you've come to study under the great Sage to become powerful. Right?" Zoe thought a moment, then shook her head, "No."

ZOE

I was taught by professional Druids and I was discovered as a child. As an infant, golden light extended from every pore of my body. After each of my reincarnations, I remembered my past life. So I was born a Sage, which freaked out my natural mother. She gave me to the Aiken Monastery, who in turn gave me to the Druids to adopt. One of the Druid women acted as a surrogate mother to me, and she was kind and sweet to me. As I was treated less like a being of awesome power, and more like a child that needed love, gradually the golden light receded. I became like a normal child, well, one raised by Druids with all sorts of natural magic.

In fact, the longer I stayed with them, the more difficult it was to become a Sage. This is not to say that in order to become one, I had to give up my feelings or some nonsense. Rather, I was trying so hard to fit in that I probably didn't want to do it, and when I finally had to, it felt sort of like trying to pull a hand or foot off my body. I couldn't stand the idea of someone judging me to be odd.

I remember growing older, and how excited I was to be learning magical techniques. I had a real drive to do so, and the Druids were getting concerned. "Remember, my daughter," one said, though in fact I wasn't his daughter, "any magic that you learn, if used without restraint, can be abused or can corrupt you. True power is knowing restraint." Yeah, what did that old man know? I sought after more and more techniques, learning how to walk on clouds, talk to animals, control vines, and even change my shape. I learned three forms: a wolf, an auk (a species of bird that can fly as well as swim

underwater), and a porpoise. It was time for me to learn the Druidfire technique like the other students. I was excited, and I was sure that I was ready!

The senior Druids had other ideas. They decided to teach me what would happen if I misused power. Two volunteered for this, as I later learned. Until just after fighting the Gate Guardian, the reason I couldn't use Druidfire wasn't because I was inept at using elemental ability, it was because I blocked out all memories of learning to use it. On some level, I had learned my lesson though. I was lacking in confidence, and wary about abusing my power. I was getting better lately, but wouldn't make the mistake of being cocky like back then.

The first Druid agreed to teach me Druidfire, and showed the various steps. Then, he demonstrated. He sent out a burst of energy into the air. Magic develops as you use it, and grow in experience. More practiced wonder-workers will have more mystic power, and also better endure the effects of their own casting. A novice will have trouble using more than a small fireball without hurting themselves, while a master can summon enough power to destroy a forest. Magic also depends on how much power you spread to a single area, so a cone of fire is much weaker than a dense ball. All this means that when a person knows their limits, they will gradually grow stronger and stronger. But he decided to push those limits. The already huge stream of fire became tremendous and then titanic, until heat and light filled the sky. I was awe-inspired until I realized what was happening. Until I saw his body smoke. You see, when a caster pushes beyond their limits, the mystic power in their bloodstream getting depleted isn't enough. They start to convert their muscles into mystic power, then their fat, then their skin, and then their bones. If only done partially, it would cause magical backlash in the form of bleeding and physical strain, but he wasn't holding back at all. I blinked, and the Druid burst into blue flames as he spontaneously combusted. His Druidfire cut off suddenly, as he was coated in fire intense enough to frighten me. And then he was gone. As was true of most spontaneous combustion, the area nearby was untouched. A stench came from the spot where he stood, and there was not even enough of him to be called ashes. I can still remember that odor of burning flesh. “No,” I said. Never again.

Ambrosia looked confused, “What do you mean 'no'? You've been struggling all this time to use this without turning to stone, now this guy hands you the keys to mastering it on a silver platter, and you turn up your nose at it. What's wrong with you?!?” I snarled, “I just **can't**, okay? I can't use power for its own sake. Not after what I saw...” I lowered my head. Ambrosia didn't understand, but she could see whatever reasons I had were making me depressed. “Anyway,” I said, “the Elder has power and he's basically imprisoned inside the Grove. Power can work against you too.” Lao Tzu smiled, “Those who want power the least will be trusted with the most. I shall give you power against your will. Mwahaha!!!” He edged closer and touched my chakra points in turn, awakening my long dormant energy. I screamed, as light poured from my eyes and other orifices, but gradually, it receded. After giving me this power, all the effects of the Sage Peach went away, and he returned to the form of a cat. I glared at him pretty hard, but eventually I got over it. It was time to try the Sage trance thingy.

I went through the steps from before of how I drew my Sage form out, and was surprised at how easy it felt. Before, it felt like I had to be really angry and really calm and the same time, and I felt a sort of balance scale where if I were a hair off a awesome mood or something, I'd turn to stone or blow up. This time, however, I just kinda felt like I was getting into the zone, and suddenly I changed completely.

It wasn't all peachy though. For some reason, although I could draw it out easier, I couldn't maintain it like before. “Hey, what gives?” I asked him, “it just cuts out on me. Why won't it last?” He shrugged, “I drew your power out so you'd be able to summon it more easily and without problems. But you still need to be strong enough to maintain it.”

It would be time to practice later. For now, I told Ambrosia, “Enough of this, let's just deliver that letter to that girl and get of here already!” And so, at my urging, we headed back to Opening using Bahamut. She was more than a little grumpy about having to fly back and forth, but we appeased her by letting her eat the nearby flora and fauna.

Inside Opening, we gave the note to the girl, only for her to tell us, “Oh that? I got that traded back to me while you were gone! Then I traded it for a bowl of chicken soup.

Wait, why are you looking at me that way...? Get back! Noooo!!!" Yeah, we roughed her up a bit. Serves her right, trading away an incredibly rare artifact for something worthless, not once but twice! Anyway, after a sound beating, she offered to sell us some sushi for our trouble. And after some more... convincing... she offered to sell it at a discount price. I mean... she gave it away.

AMBROSIA

I wanted to do a sidequest, come to think of it. Aqorm asked, "Hey, do you think maybe we could train me? Not for battle, I want to learn some more music so after this journey, I'll have a marketable skill." I was going to protest, but she whispered in my ear that she had figured out what I was doing, and probably everyone but Lilith, Zoe, and Nevras was sharp enough that they also knew. And I knew Nevras would have figured it out, if he wasn't so blinded as to trust me completely. I sighed, "Okay."

To ease some of the tension, Azrael also said, "Hey can we just check out major libraries, and then Aqorm can practice the songs in bars? That way, I can also read books and improve my Exorcism." When she said it that way, it sounded like a good idea.

AQORM

According to legend, there were four ancient song sheets that had to be found, in order to become a master musician of any sort. These sacred songs were written be master geomancers, and in the right hands, could greatly increase the power of someone like me. Azrael found all the books she needed almost right away. Kushiyama's library, along with the Great Library, yielded results just by requesting help from the librarians. Now that Yazim Jianne had the ability to teleport us around, our trip to all the many libraries in the world was done in a matter of days. However, he had to stop for awhile. "I can only do this so many times in a short time, especially if I'm teleporting all of you guys," said Yazim Jianne, "give me a break!" I hadn't found my song sheets, looking in the normal way. So, then we decided to do abnormal things.

We looked everywhere, solving bizarre puzzles or riddles, and finding them in peculiar places. Having read some old legend, I noticed that there was a painting in Zuran that had always bugged me as to how real it looked. I went back to the inn and stared at it, getting closer and closer, looking at details. It was a landscape picture that was big enough to fit my entire body into, with a forest in the background, and a piece of reddish-brown vellum paper resting on a tree stump. I tried to make out what the sheet of paper said, but as I couldn't. I just kept moving closer to it, until I noticed something. The grass was moving as if by an unseen wind. I backed up in surprise and no longer saw any movement. I must have been imagining things! I moved steadily closer. It was blowing after all! But where was the wind blowing from?

It took quite a bit of experimentation to figure out that my movements and my breathing was creating some wind. I even had to hold my breath once. But when I did, I tried to reach inside the painting. It felt like I was pushing my hand through a paint bucket, but once I did, my hand moved inside the painting. The paper was much father away than perspective let me believe though. Since I still couldn't reach it, I closed my eyes and mouth then I stumbled inside. The creepy sensation began again, then stopped. I was within a real forest. On the end that I had come from, I saw a multicolored square around the same size and shape as the frame I had stepped into. The forest continued for quite some way. If I strayed too far, I might have trouble finding my way back! I guess that I was lucky that this wasn't a painting of a scene in space. I picked up this piece of vellum, and read it. It was a huge sheet so it held a massive amount of music on just the front side. The song was called *The Beds Are Burning*, by Midnight Oil. I grabbed it and made it outside the painting, breathing in some paint on the way. The others stared. "That was the creepiest thing I've ever seen," Nevras said. I sat down, and went to the inn's piano and started playing. It was a fairly simple song, but after playing I felt my understanding of fire-based geomancy increase. I was about to roll this up to pack it away, when I noticed strange markings on the back. I turned it over and saw what basically amounted to a map of the world. Only, it wasn't whole. In fact, this was just the sort of map that could probably only be completed when all pieces were discovered. There was, however, a map containing from Ghobli all the way over to where Galaxia

and Gruumi were, and as far south as Phoenix. Looking at the map, I noticed a tiny mark to the northeast of Gruumi, where a forest was. There was tiny writing saying, «Knock three times on the ceiling.» I thought this was a strange thing to say, but then I remembered something about that. I realized the instructions were themselves lyrics to another song. Humming it briefly, I managed to get it stuck in my head.

We made our way to Gruumi by boat, then wandered toward the forest. Moving randomly through this forest, we fought off snakes and bears until we finally saw a small hut in the middle of the woods. The hut was fairly simple. It was a one-room house with a bed and a stove, a few supplies such as wood and salted meat, and a painting that had a picture of a pipe for smoking which said, «*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*.» For some reason, I had the idea of knocking on the ceiling three times. But nothing happened. Was I missing something?

Then Elias, went over where the painting was, and backhanded it twice. A chime sounded, and the painting spat out another vellum scroll, this one was green probably from mold. "Huh?" I said, "the instructions said to hit the ceiling. Why...?" Elias explained, "You understand that this is part of a song right?" I nodded, "Yes, but if you hit the pipe twice, that's if the answer is no. Why should that be the right answer?" Elias explained again, "Yes, but this painting is not a pipe, it's a representation of one. The artist even says so. So, even though we shouldn't be hitting the pipe, this isn't a pipe, so it's exactly what we should be hitting!" I think my brain exploded, working through the logic. Gradually though, I got a grip. I looked at the page.

It was called *Earth Song* and it was by Michael Jackson. I took it over to Gruumi to play. I noticed that the map on the back didn't appear until after I played, because the runes were activated by sound. The map showed the southeastern parts of New Earth, diagonal from the first map, all the way south to Hinata. The map this time pointed to Kushiyama, and the instructions mentioned an elaborate and rather embarrassing dance that needed to be performed. All of us learned this dance, but Lilith wasn't very good at remembering the moves. "It's just a jump to the left...?" she muttered, trying to remember the rest. "And a step to the right," Elias explained, trying to jog her memory. I helped out too, "Put your hands on your hips..." Elias, finished the sentence for me, "And bring your knees in tight." I sensed she would have no trouble with the pelvic thrust though.

We made it to town, but the huge size of this city made it difficult to find the precise location, so we wound up starting a flash mob in several points around the city hoping to find the exact spot where the dance would activate the puzzle. The crowd thought we were a bit odd, but then we taught them the dance steps and got them to help. Eventually we hit the right spot, and the song sheet popped up from the ground. The song was called *Don't Tell the Wind* by Zeno, and it was a long version with a lot of instrumental jam sessions. After our strange dancing, we had an absolutely huge audience of curious people. I was gonna have to ask these guys to help me advertise if ever I did become big. The next map appeared, but this one was tricky, because it pointed directly into the ocean. This one had no instructions. What were we supposed to do?

CHAPTER 10

In which Atlantis is found, and Selqui joins the group.

AMBROSIA

Having no idea where this fourth scroll was, we decided to head toward Aquamundo. The only entrance we knew of was through the cave near Galaxia, so we headed in that general direction. We looked at the vellum paper. It had a slight gold tone to it, and like each of the song sheets, when Aqorm read from it, she seemed to get stronger. According to legend, while the song sheets had potent magic of their own, the Song Book would lead to an ultimate weapon. Honestly, I just went along with this quest to buy time, but it turned out to be really important for Aqorm getting stronger.

Riding on Bahamut, we got to Galaxia, and landed right in front of the cave. It was once again rather dark, but in addition to our Lantern, Yazim Jianne had a quick spell of Brighten and Azrael had the Illuminate spell ready.

My Brighten spell works differently than Illuminate, since it cannot create light, only reinforce existing sources. Sorcery is viewed as a forbidden art because it draws from the user rather than God, and their magic is based on their mental and physical endurance. In some ways, it bypasses the spiritual limits God has set up for himself.

But there are some things we also cannot do because we use rules and limits of science. For instance, “matter cannot be created or destroyed” means that while we can rework energy and matter in tremendous ways, even creating a single photon of light becomes a difficult proposition. When making light, the old scientists wound up with unnecessary by-products. For instance, so-called light bulbs were mostly devices to heat a wire until it glowed. Or they needed radiation.

The cave twisted and turned, as we fended off spiders, bats, and small rodents. It is difficult to believe that this group used to have trouble fighting such beings, but earlier on their quest, this was actually a hindrance to them. At last we came to the large cavern lake that led to Aquamundo. Aside from using a submarine (which was usually regarded as an act of war if traveling directly into the town), this was the most effective means of entry. The others donned heavy swimming armor. I had my Sea Ring, which formed a bubble allowing me to breathe and to withstand underwater pressure. The Sea Ring was the wedding ring my wife had given me, and it was crafted to be durable, so I wore it always. While the others stumbled around in their bulky outfits, Michael, Lilith, Aqorm, and I walked casually through these waters.

We made it to Aquamundo. The map on the back had reacted to the seawater, however, and an inscription read, «Seek out the island of Atlantis.» But everyone knew Atlantis no longer existed! The others in the group told me otherwise. They mentioned seeing a path to it earlier. We headed that way, but noticed it was still closed. “Let's ask the ruler of Aquamundo,” suggested Aqorm.

The land of Aquamundo had a wild natural beauty that was difficult to describe with valleys filled with water, squid swimming overhead, kelp and anemone swished about like natural plants, coral formed along the rocks, and plankton floating around the seawater. The world around us would have been alien to most of the group, but Sarai and I had spent much of our research time in an underwater lab over the years. But we lived secure within a climate-controlled dome, we imported livestock into the area, and we farmed and grew our own food. We didn't have the same experience as those who gathered sea kelp, hunted sharks, and built their houses using the materials nearby.

The sea folk breathed both air and water, but for the sake of travelers, most indoor dwellings were dry. Houses featured a number of passive means of draining water, such as grates near the doorstep, the door actually opening to a basement, and trap doors. This allowed the living quarters to remain dry, as water sank to a lower floor But there were also artificial means of staying dry such as a pump system, and dehumidifiers. Lastly, runes were carved into the inside of the house to allow the entire structure to evaporate water. As a result, all homes tended to be slightly more steamy than would normally be expected, and mold was a real problem. Cleaning jellies were often kept as pets to maintain the houses over time. Those scrubbing bubbles got all the scum off.

The king and queen of Aquamundo were actual sea folk, who had long since evolved to the rigors of the deep. The king's skin was covered in delicate scales, and was coated in slime like an eel. Their palace kept the water at bay through a system of air suction, sucking water away before it penetrated the door. The drawback however was that anyone entering felt like they immediately needed to quench their thirst, as it also sucked moisture from the air inside. “Welcome,” said Sea King Apsaras, “what can we do for you?” We explained our situation.

He smiled, “Oh that? Atlantis has been using that excuse for centuries! The truth is, Atlantis was once part of the surface world but around 2000 BC some event happened that massively altered history. They won't tell us anything about it, but apparently there is some vague carving outside of town that shows a giant whale called the Wind Fish, but most of the writing is defaced.” We noticed this too, but the plaque was pretty garbled as he said. It had a big whale and only read, «TO•T_E•F_ _D_R, TH_•N_ _•E_ _T_•_S•B_

_•_ _•ILL_ _I_ _, A•S_E_E•O_• _ _E•_I_•O_•A•S_ _E_ER'S•E_ E. A_A_E_• _ _E• D_E_M_R, A_ _• _ _E•C_E_T_ _N•W_L_• V_N_S_• M_C_• L_K_• A• B_B_L_• O_•A•N_E_ _E. R_A_ER, Y_U•S_O_LD•K_O_•T_E•T_U_H!» I was thankful for the • interpunct that allowed us to figure out where a word started and ended. But the lack of letters made this rather unreadable. Still, we copied it down, and while listening to the king talk, I worked on it with a pad of paper. «TO•THE•F_ _DER, THE•NEW•EARTH•IS•BUT•_ _•ILL_ _I_ _, A•S_E_E•O_•THE•_I_•OF•A• S_ _E_ER'S •EYE. A_A_E_•THE• D_E_M_R, AND•THE•C_E_T_ _N•WILL• V_N_S_• MUCH• LIKE• A•B_B_L_• ON•A•N_E_ _E. READER, YOU• SHOULD• KNOW• THE•TRUTH!» I was an inventor and therefore a genius, but some words I couldn't figure out either by context or letter placement. The last sentence, I was particularly proud of, even though I had no idea what this truth was. I looked up and realized that the king had been explaining a great deal of things while my attention had been focused elsewhere. Oh bollocks, what had he said?

AMBROSIA

Yazim Jianne had been scratching stuff down on a piece of paper, and ignored the part where the king had explained that the most likely cause of them hiding themselves from the rest of the world was due to some great war or natural event, which caused the city to fall into the ocean in the first place. He suspected the former, since this would explain closing the passage in the first place. But he assured me not to worry. He would personally open the passage.

Our group followed the king as he pressed his hand on the doorway, opening the area up. "I will close this area area behind you after you enter. The people of Atlantis have a rather strict immigration policy, and you are unlikely to be able to stay longer than a single day." We stepped inside and the stone wall closed behind us. Oh well. We explored the city of Atlantis.

It was much different from the town of Aquamundo. The other town had been mostly stone, with small additions to each house to adapt to water flowing in. The buildings in this city were made of adamant metal and glass of a sort that I had never seen. They glowed on their own, despite no discernible light anywhere.

As we wandered around this town, we saw merchants of all sorts standing outside, peddling goods. There were a variety of underwater races in Atlantis living together, and all were welcome until they made trouble. Atlantis had a pretty strong deportation policy, so people like us who couldn't breathe underwater were given entry only as tourists. That didn't stop them from trying to sell us goods, though. We asked for a tour of the town from sahagin woman, and the guide explained all about different races and sights to see, so we wound up learning a lot. Unlike Aquamundo, which had a majority human population, humans could not survive for a prolonged period here. We realized after his explanation that the king and queen had been sahagin and merfolk, respectively. Sahagin were scaly-skinned amphibians, while merfolk tended to appear human from the waist up and fish down below with some of them having blue skin. Contrary to popular belief, mermaids tended to not be particularly good in bed, unless you were okay with them laying loads of eggs. There were also sharkfolk which had the upper body of a shark and the lower body of a human, there were sea witches which invariably were female (though seldom pleasant-looking) with powerful magic and the lower body of a squid, and then there were the selkies. Aside from mermaids, selkies were the most likely to make it to shore, since they had outer skins of seals which they could strip off partially or completely. Because of this, selkies could blend as either seals or humans, but down here they had no reason to pretend at being anything but a selkie, so they often appeared as females from the waist up, and wore their skins to cover their lower bodies.

The people of Atlantis had not drastically changed in centuries, so while much of the world around them had developed modern religions, they still had old temples to Poseidon. Not that much could be called old here, their buildings were basically skyscrapers, to the limit of what the height of this cave allowed. The various sea races were able to open tunnels into the cave by pressing on certain panels, and the industrial and agricultural technology seemed to be far beyond that of the rest of the New Earth.

The guide showed us cultural museums, temples, and all manner of inns and shops. There were domes for growing crops, despite the ever-present salt water. The residential section seemed to be tailor-made for those who lived on water rather than land, so in some cases no effort was made to keep water from entering. The walls were lined with stone plaques displaying Atlantis's history. It showed very strange things, and it got weirder the farther back you went. The stone tablets seemed to be showing major events in Atlantean history from newest backward. The newest had merfolk shaking hands with elves and humans, then the Earth splitting, then a submarine visiting Atlantis, a sort of Ascent of Man style picture but with merfolk, an island sinking, flying buildings which were firing beams of energy and people chanting or something, some sort of disaster and people building boats, flying discs near pyramids, a Yin Yang, and then... nothing. I looked at some of the earlier pictures, and to my surprise, there were strange gaps. It was strange enough what they had already carved, what did they have to hide?

I asked the guide to explain this. She explained, “The newest picture is the forming of the Council. Before that, is the forming of the New Earth and Void, as imagined by our artists. The next one explains why the borders of Atlantis are now largely closed to outsiders without some kind of authority or permission, since humans tried at one point to invade. This one shows the evolution of our life after Atlantis sank. And this one shows Atlantis sinking.” I interrupted, “Why did it sink, anyway?” She recounted, “Ages ago, all of civilization had elites who understood the same secrets of technology as we do. But only a few countries actually were advanced enough that such things were widespread This created a gap where commoners were living in huts while the elites knew secrets of science and mystic power. This is why these same huts had incredible stone structures that are difficult to build even with forklifts, they used their power and knowledge to do things beyond the current understanding. This meant that princes fought with 'Brahma weapons' while architecture all around the area was stone and wood. This is what you see in the picture just before it, huge buildings that were actually weapons of war, capable of firing tachyon beams or dropping nuclear missiles.” I asked, “So what's the deal with the rest of these? And why the blank space?”

She elaborated, “I believe the boats are reference to a worldwide crisis in which humanity was forced to flee. It is always represented as a flood, but it may not have been. For that matter, these may not have been boats at all but spaceships. As for the picture before it, accounts differ as to what this means. Some say that aliens built the pyramids, others say that during early history they either attacked humans or taught them technology. Or it could be that these elites I mentioned before were aliens. As for the blank pictures, it is believed this represents the division of creation into the ten thousand things, as Taoists put it, even though there are more than that. The ancient Atlanteans must have known what happened before that, but for some reason, we cannot see them.”

I looked carefully again at these depictions. Wars, invasions, evolution, hidden technology, world destruction and re-creation, and a depiction of the creation of the world we know of. Wait, maybe that was it! I was looking at the stone tablets from my perspective as a being of this universe, but what was before that? I remembered the numerous myths left behind by ancient cultures, touched the tablet, and said, “Light!” This wasn't a spell, as I had none, and no runes transferred anywhere. Nor did any light appear. The Light I was referring to was that in the creation stories there was Void or undifferentiated gunk, and Light was the process by which the divided was united, and that which was too united was divided. You know of this is the Big Bang, where all mater exploded into stars and space, and planets began to have earth and sky. It didn't matter if it was Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, or what, they used different terms for the same theory. I kept my hand on the tablet, and tried to visualize a world where such divisions did not exist. Such a thing was completely alien to my imagination, except when we were in the presence of God. The stone tablets began to fill in, one by one, with the other half of the stone tablet with the Yin Yang showing a circle of light on the left side that before had been blank. The last vellum scroll popped out of the stone that was half-blank. “Can you see that? The tablets are filled!” I asked the guide. The scaled women shook her head, “I saw a scroll pop out of the one you touched, if that's what you mean. But no, I don't see anything new.” Ah well, so then it was just a personal

psychotic break. I stared at the filled-in plaques and borrowed Yazim Jianne's notebook. The very first picture had a Trinity floating near a cloud or something, the half of the tablet I'd filled in had light, and between those, there was a picture of someone's hand in the process of sculpting stuff in sand before the water came, and there was one tablet between that I couldn't understand. I was a pretty good artist when I took the time. I sketched out the pictures as I now saw them. Yazim looked at the one and asked, "Why are you drawing yourself sleeping in a bed?" This girl had looked familiar, but I hadn't really made the connection until he pointed it out. What exactly was this picture? Having no good explanation, I figured it was likely that this picture was out of order, and supposed to be the picture at the end. I did have a bed like this in Opening, maybe this picture was prophetic of the coming of the Oracle of Tao?

We had technically finished our mission here, but I wanted to explore some more and check out the shops before we left. But I also noticed a path to the north of town, and wanted to see it. Some of the others browsed the shops, finding an excess of seafood at the markets for very low prices, and land items for significantly higher. We even found a phase blaster there, but weapons were significantly more expensive. I handed the vellum song sheet to Aqorm, but we'd have to wait on this one, because playing music underwater was tricky. This sheet contained the song (what else) *Under the Sea*. Marching ahead at a steady pace, the path narrowed into a long pass before emptying out into an open space. This area, unlike the others, opened up to the water above. Sun shone from above, and air bubbles came through tiny holes in the rock walls. A selkie girl sat chanting, attempting to perform an underwater ritual. Who was this girl?

YAZIM JIANNE

The others were creeped out by this and headed back, apologizing for bothering her, but I stuck around. I recognized what she was chanting. "*Mgahnnn yeeogngp ngluii ot syha'h n'ghft, hai cahf yogfm'll ah ahehye, uln mgepogor mgepogg ye'bthnk ot cthulhu yog ot mgepogg ot r'lyeh. L' h' mgah'ehye ah unto ya, cahf Y' ah mgeplllln'gha ehyeog,*" she incanted. There was a lack of incense because we were deep beneath the waves but she had gotten the location and other materials needed right, from the still-beating heart of another follower, to the various trinkets needed to attract such a being by sympathetic magic. I walked up to her, my Sea Ring forming a gap in the water around me, and tapped her on the shoulder.

I was immediately stunned by a jolt of electricity. I could tell she was a powerful wonder-worker, powerful enough indeed to raise the Elder Formless Cthulhu from its lair in R'lyeh where it slept until it would come again. However...

"The stars are not right," I explained to her. The selkie girl protested, "But... I made a calendar chart based on the last time the planets aligned with the stars in the Vajrayogini Mandala. This is the method most sure to bring death and destruction. Why shouldn't this work?" I chuckled at that, "Well, first off, the Elder Formless don't use such patterns, they use non-Euclidean geometry for their release rituals. And also, you forgot that your calendar cannot be Gregorian calendar or even Julian, never mind our current Elemental Zodiac calendar, but the calendar of the Abyss. Why, the date is not even the same eon! You'll need to wait until later to be eaten first."

She sighed, deeply disappointed. I looked at the girl with interest, for she was beautiful, intelligent, and just slightly evil. I visualized her helping me with my experiments, and then I knew. If only she joined us, we would be unstoppable! "You," I asked, "what is your name?" She took my slight rudeness in mind, "I am called Selqui, and I am the daughter of King Triton. The other daughters were all beautiful mermaids who had properly married into nobility, but Triton had me through a... less than noble union. I inherited nothing, except for this Trident of Poseidon." She held up an extremely powerful artifact as though it were nothing, though she definitely knew how to wield it. She continued, "Having nothing to do, I have decided to destroy the universe. But I didn't even manage that! I'm such a loser..." She started crying, and then a shark flew past, and she casually speared it, zapped it, and tore it apart with her hands and teeth while still sobbing, reminding me of women who cry while eating chocolate, being

unaware that they are even doing so. “Hey, ummm, suck it up,” I said. I think that's what you're supposed to say when someone's in tears?

She looked up at me, I with my robe, intense eyes, and handsome face touched by ambition. “You're...” she said, “kinda different from the other ones, aren't you?” I shrugged, “If by different, you mean borderline evil, insane, and completely broken-hearted, then yes, I suppose I am.” She nodded, “Tell me all about it.”

And so, I recounted my early childhood, my ambition to learn sorcery and the lost arts of technology, my foray into mad science, and my marriage to former wife. She cried a bit more when she heard of my accident that had made me a widow, and my deal with Belial. “Everyone knows you should get a contract in writing when dealing with a demon of that sort,” she commented. I nodded ruefully, as I explained how I had become trapped in the Eternal Town, how Ambrosia had released me, and how I joined their party after they had made it through my mansion. I even told a few sex stories, such as the best time with Sarai and me, about Surrogate Lover # 2 and me, and about that one time with Sarai, Additional Lover # 7, and me where my wife basically destroyed the chimera with her lovemaking technique. Some people might think it is grossly inappropriate to share tales of old lovers, but well, what I liked about Sarai was that in addition to being very handy with a wrench and a Geiger counter, she was an absolute nymphomaniac who pleasured herself multiple times a day, and gave me sex at least thrice a week. If I was to invite her in to our group and into my life, I wanted to be sure this helper wasn't a total prude. I needed a real woman at this point in my life.

To my relief, she responded as I had hoped. “This story, you told me this for that reason, correct? You wanted to see if I would also be up for something like that? Well, I'm sorry but I'm not like your old wife,” Selqui said, then she softened as she saw my face fall, “I'm worse.” She pulled off my robe, my shoes, and my loincloth, leaving me naked but for a necklace and some enchanted jewelry. She touched my stomach. I had a feeling this was going to be rough.

I peeled the shells covering her breasts, and started sliding her seal skin off of her body, revealing two shapely legs. Unlike Surrogate Lover # 2, she didn't have claws. What she did have, however, were the sharp pointed teeth of a leopard seal, capable of tearing fish apart with little effort. I was thankful that she did not have shark's teeth. Seals' teeth are elongated at the front four for holding food, with the back teeth shorter for chewing. They were designed more like spears than cutting tools, so if she nibbled at my ear, she wouldn't be able to bite it off without effort. It would, however make a nasty puncture wound wherever she bit, even though her jaws probably weren't as strong as a real seal's were. I fully expected with her goofy personality so far to do something weird like start nibbling on my face, my neck, or maybe... but she didn't. She was actually pretty gentle. Having been with Sarai and many of our chimeras and their strange frisky personalities, I guess I was used to wild sex. But with her, despite supposedly wanting to destroy the world, she seemed to be pretty easygoing. She just enjoyed exploring my body. Being used to being clawed at, bitten, whipped, or hammered with rough sex, I honestly wasn't sure what to do when someone wanted to just be with me. Selqui spoke, “I'm sorry.” Was she apologizing for not measuring up to the stories I'd told her about the others? Because that was okay, actually. Then I noticed her eyes. Selqui's eyes were blue-green like the ocean, a sharp contrast to her medium brown hair. But these were royal blue eyes, almost like... “Sarai,” I said. The many races of sea folk came from a single race, a group of powerful psychics similar to our Soulfires. They had used much of this in a desperate bid to survive underwater, and now mainly had powers over water, wind, or lightning. But many of them were psycho-receptive, and could become possessed by good or evil spirits. A surefire way to tell was if their eyes changed, and I recognized my previous lover anywhere. She explained, “I'm sorry I left you heartbroken for so long. I know you were in pain for the longest time, and I couldn't help, I couldn't talk to you. Yazim, I want you to love this woman. I want you to be lab partners with her. I want you to be her lover, and her best friend. I want you to share everything with her, from your deepest secrets to, if possible, a family. I know I couldn't give you children, even though I loved the sex. Oh yes, and just for a little bit, I want you to fuck her brains out with me in her body. I miss you inside me, and I really miss having a

physical form. The Afterlife is so beautiful and peaceful, but I can't fully go there yet because I'm still your ghost." And so I did. I spread her legs wide, and I went inside her until she came. A little later, Selqui's eyes changed back. Sarai had passed on, and it was time to do sex the way Selqui wanted it.

Selqui was worse than Sarai as she said, but only in her sexual appetites. Although the sex was much less kinky than I was used to, she wanted to keep it going until she was totally spent. Four hours and about 8 times later, we finally rejoined the others. At one point, though she got all scary. Her eyes turned red and she started saying things like, "**Give me *blood*! Blood and flesh!!!**" That time, I actually did get bitten, and wound up taking a break to put balm on my face, neck, and arms. I later gave her a bracelet which allowed her to guard against unwanted possession. But overall, it wasn't too bad, except for exhaustion. We'd have to take it easy, or I'd probably die from too much of a good thing. We tried to pace ourselves a bit better from now on.

AQORM

Once those two rejoined the group, we decided to make it back to the surface. We got Selqui a small satchel and some pairs of clothes, because well, right now she was wearing a sealskin and some shells, and I knew she would have modesty issues when blending with humans. She kind of seemed like a mousy modest girl from what I knew of her. Nah, I'm kidding, she seemed more at home with nudity than I did, and I routinely refused to wear undergarments. This was really so the rest of the group wouldn't get embarrassed. My first goal was to find a piano, in order to unlock the last song sheet. I knew that the fate of the world might rest in discovering the Song Book, and the ultimate weapon that it supposedly revealed.

We made it to the surface, and pulled off our heavy diving suits to stow in the tent. The save point that Azrael had moved was still there, reminding us of our previous adventures. Getting prepped to go back, however, wasn't as easy as it sounds. Selqui was not very used to walking, having been on her hands and knees most of her life, since she never ventured out of Atlantis. She was used to being a seal or a hybrid, but rarely stood on her own two feet. Not just that, clothes were a real challenge for her, especially shoes. Not wanting our journey back to Galaxia to take forever, I finally just told her to go barefoot. To this day, while on land, she refuses to wear footwear.

Once in town, I set to work finding the tavern, and playing this song. The last corner of the map displayed, and I saw the words «Where the four meet» display on the surface. Putting the map together, we used Bahamut to fly to roughly the spot where all four maps met. The maps were longer than wide and the bottom two maps had more music on the front, so the center was north of what I thought it would be. We wound up on that strange island that had the portal to the Realm of Void. "Fan out," I told the others, and we combed the entire island over the next several days. "It's not here," we finally concluded. Elias requested, "Let me see that again." Studying it, he noticed that the island wasn't actually on the map. He jotted down an archaeological record based on the general date of the songs. "Let's see... *Under the Sea* was composed roughly 1989, *Don't Tell the Wind* was 1985, *Beds are Burning* was 1987, and *Earth Song* was mid 1990s. Most of these songs were with four years of each other, and recorded well before the land was anything like this. They were probably recorded again on crystals sometime before most records would have otherwise destroyed, so the maps would have been made sometime during the early history of the New Earth. Now, this island didn't appear until around 4500 AD or so according to records, so this means the location on this map is not the location." He looked at the inscription again, "Hold up. This doesn't say, 'where the four maps meet', it says 'where the four meet.'" I protested, "What's the difference?" He explained, "There are four elements, which each of these maps, and their songs represented. We need to find a place where there is a high mountain, a windy area, water nearby, and plenty of warmth. Let's go to the Great Library again, we need to look at a climate map of the world."

After returning to Galaxia, it was a short walk from Galaxia to the Great Library. As before, we had to navigate through fifteen floors of books, scrolls, blueprints. We now knew where to find maps though, so we climbed all the way to the S section on the top

shelf floor.

ELIAS

As a scholar, I knew how books were sorted in a library. The method of sorting books had not changed substantially in thousands of years. The only major difference was added categories. With the discovery of thaumaturgy and sorcery, added categories were made. But once someone understood the Dewey Decimal System, they could essentially be transplanted 5000 years in the future, and still fully understand how to find anything. For instance, a scroll map would be S 912 (which had decimals for subcategory if it was for a specific country), but since it was ancient geography, I had to refer instead to S 911. I had to search a bit to find a map based on ancient climate, but at last I found it. The map had deep blue for water, light blue for frozen wastes, light green for plains, deep green for forests, and reddish-brown for mountains. The continents had shifted somewhat, but I could definitely recognize the area where a volcano, tundra, plains, and forest all in close proximity. Over the ages, constant eruptions created the peculiar desert terrain surrounded by frozen tundra, with mountains nearby. Unfortunately, because of the massive climate changes, it was impossible to figure out where the Song Book was today, or if it had even survived such massive changes.

Yazim Jianne made a suggestion, “Perhaps it would be better if we made a time portal?” I wasn't thrilled about this idea. The risks of time travel were rather steep, since time could ripple and cause parallel dimensions. We might wind up going to the wrong present since it was now the future.

It was unlikely that you could even travel to the same timeline as yourself. Suppose I made a stone go back five seconds in the past. Now what you'd think would happen is that Stone A (the one you sent) would become Stone B (the one that popped in five seconds ago) and there would be two stones. But that's not actually what would happen. If I went back to warn myself of a disaster, before I even visited myself, the part of me that was native to the timeline would receive the memories of the visit, while the visitor got sent back home. I could occupy the same timeline as yourself, but only disguised or significantly different in age, otherwise when I got within the five senses of the original my memories would merge and I as a visitor would get displaced to my present. Of course, if I made it to the wrong timeline, I'd get displaced to parallel timeline on arrival. Since all wrong timelines would do this, this technically meant that the closer I was to the present, the more accurate my visit became to my main timeline. It also meant it was impossible to see two stones, or in fact less than one for more than a few seconds, because after the gap for sending the stone, it would get bumped back to its present. People would still know that it went back in time, they just wouldn't be able to explain why there weren't two stones if one returned to the past. This is a blessing, because I could imagine someone like Aqorm sending back the wrong stone, and creating a paradox. Thankfully, we were going to the distant past, and didn't have to worry about any of this. But we did have to worry about temporal inaccuracy.

He saw the concern in my eyes, and said, “Relax, I can make a Temporal Anchor.” I was no less concerned, for this meant we had to split the party. If anything dangerous happened, we would die in another time. And if anything happened to him, we would be trapped in the wrong time. I saw the look on Aqorm's face, though, and couldn't say no. “Oh, all right,” I sighed.

The sorcerer called out, “時間錨 ” and a magical circle formed under his feet. He would need to stay in that spot until we returned, so he would need to be guarded and cared for. We needed to split up the group. “I'm going,” I said, “who is staying and who is going with me?” Ambrosia and Nevras stayed behind. They had no desire to explore some strange time. Lilith also stayed. She had lived through this period, and did not want to see it yet again. Michael went with me, as did Aqorm, and those two girls.

The anchor formed a clear point, just outside of Galaxia where we could return to our own timeline. I was careful to tell the others not to interfere with any events, but I forgot about the bystander effect. You know, where if someone sees someone in trouble, but there are plenty of people around, they won't help? Well, back then, the ancestor of the current mayor was about to fall from a house and the guy who was going him saw all of

us, and concluded that we would help even though we weren't to do anything. We gathered the Song Book at the base of a volcano and returned, only to find out the region of Galaxia had become covered with lawless bandits because the mayor's family hadn't set up any kind of formal state here. Eventually, we did manage to save the mayor and his future generations, but it took a few tries. Now Aqorm had her Song Book, and that's the important thing.

CHAPTER 11

In which critters are killed for money. You need money to get out of bankruptcy.

AMBROSIA

As tempting as it was to just let Aqorm earn money, that was her spending money that she earned, not ours to share. We weren't about to use her for travel expenses, so we left that for her recreation time. Having spent a good deal of our money on things like building town inside our Party Tent, we only had a small amount left in the bank, and then the banks of the world basically halted business to only those who would accept the RFID Mark system. We refused, and we weren't the only ones either. Alot of people hated it too, such as Taoists, Christians, and Wiccans. It was like Obamacare, it was a system forced down people's throats rather than giving them an option. I was grandfathered in, so I simply told them to close the account, but after the penalties of early withdrawal, we wouldn't have much. We had about 10 thousand Gold left, but let's face it, Gold is heavy so I kept it there. Instead, the group got the bank to split it between us, each having personal accounts since the whole big collective banking led to all this Mark garbage. Since I didn't remove it, I had maybe 580 Gold on hand, and this would cover maybe two nice dinners for all of us. I really really needed to go shopping. I mean, I'm a beggar, and even I feel like I'm started to stink from this journey. I need a bath in the worst way.

It was a relief then, to know that Phoenix's bounty hunting board was still active. Since most of us adventurers had no marketable skills (well, Elias could work at the library, Aqorm could play music, and Lilith was a chef, but otherwise), this was probably our best option. Just sign yourself as a hunter, and hunt creatures or people. You didn't even need to pay for licensing!

Bounty hunting sprang out of the founding of the Council. The Council tried to have a privatized guard, and in some cases that is still a thing (***cough*** Opening) but they quickly realized that even a subcontracted police force could quickly get out of hand. Police are paid regularly, are always on duty, and this creates the potential for control freaks. On the other hand, generations before had tried to defund the police, and quickly realized that this was a colossal mistake about the time they started to get robbed or murdered in their own homes, and had nobody to call. Bounty hunters were a happy medium, paid only when there is a bounty on someone, and leaving regular people be.

We saw some familiar faces. Sera and Phim grabbed about fifteen sheets of paper off the bulletin board, and almost bumped into us turning around. “It's you!” screamed Phim. “Those're the... you were wanted yourself,” Sera said, pointing to Nevras, “so how dare you try to collect bounty?!?” Nevras looked confused, “What do you mean, wanted?” He showed us a bounty with a very regal version of Nevras, «**WANTED: Prince Nevras Fitzembor. CRIME: Minor Fraud Shopkeeper, Breach of Contract. REWARD: 10 Gold TERMS: Wanted Alive, or Bring a Certain Photo.**» There was a stamp of it that said **CANCELED**. Elias looked over this with confusion, “When did you do all of this? And what does it mean bring a certain photo?”

Anyway, it was a moot point, since we'd already met with the guy earlier, and given that pervert everything he wanted, including the photo. Nevras blushed, then kinda changed the subject, “Wait, you agreed to take that job for so little?” Sera and Phim explained the finer points of bounty hunting, finishing each other's sentences, “It's like this, there's many many contracts for a bounty hunter. Sometimes you get hired as a guard, other times a hit-man, or a creature hunter. And sometimes you get given a job to bring a scoundrel to justice. We do like to fancy ourselves lawmen.” I shook my head,

“Liar, lemme see those.” I tried to sneak a peek but he wouldn’t show them.

I yanked a bunch of those posters out of Sera's hand, just as Phim looked at the picture of Nevras, giggled, then attached it, and stamped the wanted poster as completed. Wanted posters had come a long way since runes were created. Today's posters had the ability to send the object in question back, provided it was a single part like hair, horns, or claws. It would be sent to the bounty office, a privately-funded business that was set up by the Council to deal with law. The bounty office would perform a Quantum Entanglement spell to see it the rest was as dead (or alive) as the bounty called for. Some bounties could slough off organs or play dead, so yea it mattered. If the hunt was successful, they'd contact the client, who would then send back the reward and the bounty office's cut. Of course, the bounty hunter never knew what the cut was. The creature's body would then disappear into thin air, and a stack of money or items would appear in its place. If the bounty hunter failed, the notice would return itself to the board and the bounty hunter would be informed that it hadn't been completed.

I looked at his bounties. «**Wanted: Cloaked Weirdo. Crime: Serious Fashion Taboo. Reward: 750 Gold and Magic Robe. Terms: Death or a Makeover**» said one. «**Wanted: Zelda Enemy Knockoff. Crime: For Violating Copyright of that octopus thingy. Reward: 1800 Gold Terms: Dead or Alive**» said a another. One elemental had made a mess of someone's carpet. Another was a priest who they couldn't fire, that they wanted dead. Then there was Isis, after whom the Isis Temple was named, who had been prayed to in order to bring back someone's son, and hadn't done it. He was right, most of the ones that he grabbed were people or creatures which were guilty of heinous crimes. Or they were so valuable that the hunt was worth it. But wait...

“But why Nevras?” I asked. He answered, “He brought shame to all women through his fraud. He made a profit from sex appeal. As a knight, I cannot allow this!” I still didn't understand why that concerned him, but apparently he was miffed about it so... “Wait, you're a knight?!?” I asked.

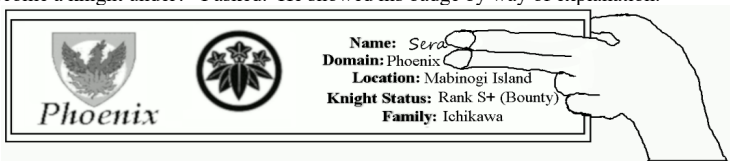
ELIAS

Yes, I understand. Those who read memoirs of knights don't really always get the significance. It is not simply a hero with fancy armor. They are nobility. A knight is a tenant giving military service as a mounted man-at-arms to a feudal landholder.

But we don't have a feudal system, so that's not accurate. Most of ours, either are already nobles raised to knighthood by the king, or they are distinguished members of knighthood through merit. Today's knights have badges like police of old, which show their family crest and the like. That is impressive.

NEVRAS

I'll be the judge of that. “You're a knight, you say,” I demanded, “prove it. What state are you from?” He explained, “From Mabinogi Island.” Hmmm. That island was a wreck of a place northeast of Phoenix, and since it didn't have a proper town, they tended to send people to one of the other towns to train. Mabinogi typically patronized Phoenix, though occasionally some became knights under Ghobli or the nearby islands. They had a few nearby choices, unlike someone from Kirin who could only serve Kushiyama or their own town because of the proximity issues. Becoming a knight was a matter of birthplace politics, but one’s choice often did come into play. “Oh? What town did you become a knight under?” I asked. He showed his badge by way of explanation.



He covered most of his name and personal info by the way he was holding it, but I could see the patron bird of Phoenix, and I recognized the sign of the Ichikawa family, also famed for their involvement in kabuki drama. That's funny. I don't recognize this guy, and I remember sitting in on a lot of the knighthood ceremonies. I didn't really get a

chance to press him on it, though. Phim urged his companion ahead, “C'mon, we got like twenty bounties, and you swore we'd do them all this week. We haven't time.”

We browsed the remaining ones, pulling off a bunch of ones that looked easy. I'll tell you about them later. Over on the corner of the bulletin board was a posting that looked like it had been there for years. It read «**Experienced Hunters Only! Wanted: Cthulhu. Crime: For Being an Elder Formless Intent on Destroying the New Earth. Reward: 75 Million Gold, A House, and one Major Artifact Terms: Sealed Away.**» We had to wait on this, because when I tried to grab it for the money reward, runes flashed and a message popped up in the air telling be that until we completed fifteen bounty hunts, we weren't eligible.

Our first bounty was the Evil Bunny. The bounty posters pointed us in the general direction of the hunt, so I knew the creature was on the outskirts of Opening and Shoten. However, because it didn't tell the exact location, we had to kill a great number of rabbits before we found one that was different. And this was definitely different. It had tiny horns, and it was cuter and faster than other rabbits. Arrows were no good, as it turned on a dime, so we tried to chase after it on foot. But that wasn't any good either. We'd chase it towards the water, and all of a sudden, it made a sharp right turn, and just as we had corrected our path, it made another sharp turn, and managed to run behind our original position. We tried chasing it towards a mountain, and it climbed the rock, and then hopped over us. After chasing it for days, we decided to hunt it strategically. We split into small groups, one group chasing it like normal, and the others fanned out in order to trap it. It worked, partially. That is to say, we did get the beast to stop running. The drawback was, now it decided to attack us. It’s so cute and adorable... Oh My God!

ELIAS

Ancient archaeological petroglyphs tell of the Pillar Men, about four or so super-beings that were worshiped as deities by the vampires. They were at least as old as Lilith (the original Lilith), dating back in time to the first humans. They had a number of freakish powers, and could only be destroyed by high level magic.

One of the things it could do was create artificial lifeforms, so a chipmunk could appear all cute but in fact tear apart other chipmunks and grown soldiers. I was strongly reminded of this ancient legend before I was rendered dead for a half-hour after it torn at my jugular, bit through my lungs, heart, spleen, and other internal organs.

I know, revival sounds like a quick fix, but it's significantly more difficult when multiple organs are affected. Those have to be healed, then toxins need to be cleansed, or the body will quickly die again once raised. Resurrection is a different story, but it tends to be either a ritual or a spontaneous miracle.

So it safe to say that by the time I was actually revived, the battle was over. The rascally rabbit took out half our party. Azrael put up a ward in time to fend it off, and Lilith basically showed it what a real demon was like. Azrael spent most of her energy raising Zoe and me, as we could help raise the others. Some of the easier deaths to treat, we simply used Phoenix Meat, since all of us were exhausted from casting healing and revival. We looked at the bounty, and it said only 150 Gold. What?!? Did they underestimate this thing? Anyway, we turned in its head, and got our reward. The other rabbits we saved for meat, and we sold all of their skins for about 1500 Gold. I put that money in the bank, and headed out on our next bounty.

AMBROSIA

Despite Elias's suspicions, it turned out that we were looking at this wrong. The bounty system was not in fact based on danger or even perceived danger of the mark, but rather how much it impacted the world around it. This is why Cthulhu was so big a mark, because he had the ability to destroy much of the world. To put it in perspective, the Evil Bunny only attacked if cornered or harassed, so its impact was said to be low; on the other hand, the so-called Killer Butterfly did in fact sting like a bee, but was about ten times the bounty because it tended to sleeping-gas attack any tourists to the Great Tree, creating a major nuisance. Aqorm, being a half-elf and thus immune to sleeping effects, simply engaged it in single combat and took it down with a few quick strikes.

We decided to scratch the idea of doing it strictly by map location, and just figure it

out as we go. The next target, then, was the Hooded Bum in Galaxia. I spoke to the bounty offices about this one. I mean, people shouldn't be going after the homeless! But as she reviewed our case numbers, the desk clerk showed how things were different. Normally, I slept and hung out in the forest or farm areas of town, not along the streets. And while I did no con artistry or theft, this man was an angry drunk nuisance, and rather than finding a quiet shelter out of the way, he had the gall to tent camp right in front of a major shopping area, dumping trash and beer bottles everywhere, making open fires, defecating all over the place, and cursing at people. The lack of formalized legal system meant if people were homeless, they could do many of these things individually as long as they cleaned up after themselves and didn't create a major nuisance. But once people complained in large numbers, they could be eligible for investigation by the town guard and/or become a bounty. I remembered well, having to dig holes or using public commodes, having to head to the nearest trash can with my junk, cleaning up my sleeping space, and only starting fires at night. But this guy did all of this at once, it sounded like, and was mean to random people who tried to help him, even attacking them. It sounded less like his crime was being homeless, and more like everything that followed.

I read on. Apparently, the guards tried to explain politely how he needed to at the very least, do something about the use pile of garbage and feces near him. He responded by cursing at them, then throwing feces at them, and attacking. He shouldn't have been any trouble for the guards, with their strong field of antimagic, but apparently he dealt with the whole lot of them easily. I accepted this quest for the good name of all beggars.

As always, the weather in Galaxia mocked us. Since it had formed from such a strange intersect of forests, volcanoes, and frozen wastes, the weather had been completely random for centuries. The New Earth got all kinds of freakish weather as well as Earth's normal weather thanks to the Yin/Yang confluence, from beams of holy light that exorcised demons, to pulses of cosmic light which could demolish buildings, to intense localized darkness, to necromancy auras as weather, to spontaneous meteor showers, to acid rain and smog, to rains of random objects picked up by tornadoes, to something called a diamond storm which involved sharp carbon hail, blood rain (which was actually an algae), and so on. One time, some thick fog appeared in places, and seemed erase everything from view.

It wasn't like this was the only place with odd weather though. In Kushiyama's history, there had been a king who got tired of ordinary weather, so he summoned some green goo using sorcerers. He apologized then, but maybe he didn't mean it? But nowhere was more random than Galaxia, where freak weather was nearly as common as a wind storm. Houses in town tended to be built sturdy.

God gives good and evil fortune alike, designed usually to help us grow for the better, but sometimes just because God's pissed off. According to legend, when Jesus died, for the next forty years, four signs visited the Temple. The menorah suddenly snuffed out every night, the doors of the Temple swung open on their own, the sacrifice no longer turned the cloth white but stayed red, and the lots would always go to the “scapegoat.” And yet, it is a mistake to believe that all misfortune is God's direct judgement. Galaxia is not filled with horrible people. They simply live in a weird location.

Today, it was raining some sort of flaky stuff which gathered along the ground. I didn't know what it was, but it seemed kinda syrupy sweet, white, and smelled vaguely breadlike. In fact, the people in town seemed to know exactly what to do with it, making it into a sweet flatbread that Aqorm called *lembas*. No matter who I asked, they each had a different answer what it was. Some thought it was lichen, others said wood sap from nearby trees, or a byproduct of aphids. All they could agree on was that it wasn't shelf-stable, at least without baking. I had no idea what it was, so I didn't eat it. It was funny, my adopted family lived here, but I never remember seeing this stuff.

When we came to his tent in Galaxia, it was an eyesore, even worse than described, and you couldn't even enter the store without coming through his tent, where he would aggressively beg for money. Nearby his tent was basically a landfill. I signaled to Zoe, and she started burning this stuff, and used the ashes to grow plants. The bum said, “My feces! You'll pay for that, motherfuckers!” He continued, spitting out a long string of expletives, before gulping a quart of alcohol. And then he attacked.

I quickly understood why he was such a problem for the town guard, like Azrael he had Solid Magic, and could rip right through both magical shields and antimagic. He used mainly earth magic, kicking up dust at us, throwing rocks, making large masses of rocks to push, poke, or bash at us. He wasn't that strong, but he was skilled enough that our defenses weren't working. When we fought back, he made a shield solid enough to disperse our attacks.

This guy was a tough customer, so I told the others to stay back. This was my fight. He cast Stones at me, hoping the spell would fend me off. But I was a beggar, I knew about people chucking stones at me. I instinctively dived to the ground. Next, he tried to make an earthquake under my feet, but I grabbed him with my fishing pole, and hauled myself up before I fell into a pit. I used Michael's Crest to ward off his attacks and give him back some of the pain he was causing others. And then, he tried to throw spears of rock at me, and I used the power of Apollo to reverse these back at him. Unlike rune-based magic, my Crest always worked, even against some physical attacks like thrown objects. And so, the spears just reversed directions and flew at him. Surprised, he threw up a shield, but I wasn't having any more of his crap. It was up to him if he wanted to be drunk or bitter, to curse people, and waste his obviously first-class talent. But it stopped being his business when he hurt and annoyed people, and it stopped when he attacked people for asking him politely to clean up small messes. I used my Aiken Crest to open wide his barrier, and he was impaled with extreme prejudice by four large spikes. I pulled out one of his teeth, and the bounty was collected, leaving a pile of coins. It wasn't right to take this money. Instead, I paid it out to the shopkeeper, the people who had handed out their money to this guy, and everyone who had suffered from his refusing to take responsibility over the hurt he'd caused. There was even some left over to cover the burial of the guards he'd slain.

Since we were near several bounties, I next turned toward Gruumi. Apparently, the Boy With Stick was nearby. He was a runaway, and his parents wanted him dead or alive. But the price was much more for being alive, so they weren't total deadbeats. When we found him, he was carrying what was called a bindlestiff, basically a stick with a bag attached. This would be easy, just whack the kid over the head, and return one hair on his head, and the bounty office would bring him back to his parents. Only, we didn't account for his superhuman strength. “Get away from me!” he cried, flailing his stick around. As he did, he felled a nearby tree, split the ground nearby, and smashed up a rock nearby. Oh, crap! If that hit us, we'd all be done for. This time, Aqorm saved the day. Binding his arms with vines she had made through geomancy, she grabbed the stick out of his hands. All of us looked concerned that this freakishly strong kid would burst from his restraints, but she shook her head. “What's wrong?” she asked. Seeing our fear, she laughed, “You didn't think he was this strong, did you? This is all the stick.” So saying, she gave a light tap to a nearby rock and watched it turn into powder. “Hey, kid,” she said, “I know you think that things are terrible at home, but look at this. This bounty says you're worth much more alive than dead. This was your parents. As much trouble as you think you're in, they put up a bounty clearly telling people to rescue you.” The kid cried, then nodded his head. “You good? So, because I don't know exactly where you live, but we can leave it to the bounty offices. Hold up there, I need... this!” She yanked one of the child's teeth out. It wasn't at all ready to come, so he screamed pretty loudly. She placed this on bounty sheet, and the child was teleported away somewhere. Meanwhile, we got about 5000 Gold, and a Diamond Ring. As an item, it had special abilities of making a team of two fight more effectively, but it could only do this when paired with a matching item, the Gold Ring. I snatched it up, before anyone else claimed it, or even noticed it in the pile. I'd save this for later, when I proposed to him.

It was around four o'clock when one might begin boiling things for dinner, and the slimy yet lithe badgers (lizards?) gyrated and made holes near the grass around the sundial. The shabby-looking birds nearby were all flimsy and miserable, and the lost pigs bellowed and whistled. Some dude warned us to beware of some critter nearby called the Jabberwock, but you know, it was one of our bounties. We headed straight for it. Selqui, with all of our wandering about had gotten much better at walking than before, so she said she was ready to help us fight now.

The creature looked less like a modern lizard, and more like a dinosaur. We had dinosaurs in parts of the New Earth, but they tended to gather in remote areas where most people were not able to see them, with the highest concentration in the valley south of Hinata. In civilized areas, they had been hunted into extinction long ago, so nobody was sure exactly how they looked. This thing definitely a meat-eater, but had a longer neck than something like a T-Rex. Unlike the classic image of a hydra being something akin to a flat-footed Brontosaur with sharp teeth and multiple heads, this guy walked upright, on feet with a slight arch, had a short tail, and claws almost like a mole's. Elias explained to me that it closely resembled the Segnosaurus, a theropod, whatever that is.

The creature lumbered towards us with a slight hunch. The multiple heads with sharp teeth were dangerous, but it also meant that this creature had to constantly balance itself, and had to decide where it was going to go with multiple minds before taking a single step. I guess many heads really aren't better than one!

SELQUI

The scientific community wanted to do two things, to undermine the creationist model in favor of an evolutionist one, and to help explain that dragons developed gradually from dinosaurs. Unlike those above the water, who grew up seeing dinosaurs in museums, our people lived before the time of dragons. We knew that God allowed adaptations, but Darwin's theory of how evolution worked didn't pan out. I personally had lived long enough to see aquatic life not evolve at all in terms of time, but adapt very quickly to emergencies. Massive amounts of dinosaurs were probably just plaster casting, fused together bones, or carved from bones that were “found” at a dig site. In fact, there's a number of reasons dinosaurs simply cannot exist:

I. Dinosaur discoveries having occurred only two centuries from when evolutionary theory was proposed and in huge quantities going against the laws of probability,
II. Dinosaur discoverers typically are only those with a vested interest in proving such, and not archaeologists who discover such by accident,
III. The nature of public display preparation, calling into question the source of fossils, and allowing for the possibility of tampering on a systematic basis,
IV. Existing exhibits showing off-balance postures that basic physics would claim impossible. For example, many dinosaurs have bodies which are entirely too heavy in front (this one is a good example with its multiple heads),
V. Very low odds of all these dinosaur bones being fossilized but relatively few bones of other animals,
VI. Implications to the theory of evolution and the belief that man was created in God's image, suggesting possible hidden political agendas, and
VII. The withdrawal of funding for organizations and people questioning or being skeptical of public displays of dinosaurs.

I was convinced there was an elaborate fraud going on. Looking at this beast, I refused to believe that it was real, as it growled at me. I was fully prepared to do away with this false thing. I pulled my trident out of empty space, and Nevras joined me in the fight.

Nevras swung with his sword, while I stabbed at its body with my trident. It screamed in pain from my thrust, and more from the electricity I sent through it. I pulled out my trident and stepped around with my feet, watching Nevras as he “lunged” as he called it, moving quickly to this side or that. I did the same, and was amazed when it worked, the necks and heads of the thing missing the spot when I was before. He taught me to watch for the attacker, and to lunge up, down, left, and right. He swung his blade again. The blade went snicker-snack and off with his head. Unfortunately, two heads cropped up from the stump. Taken off guard, the extra head bit off my arm. I looked at these humans, and their looks of mourning. Could they not regrow their limbs?

Taking a second to jump back from the action, I pushed outward with the stump, and my arm popped out muscle first, then bone set in spots between, limb covered in a sort of amniotic fluid. My skin came last. The limb was very small like a child's, but gradually grew to normal size. The looks of mourning turn to shock, then turned to sighs of deep relief, all in the space of a few seconds. My trident was over there, so I called it to me.

We sea-critters all have magic much different from the land-folk. I have a strange mix of water/wind elementalism, though unlike land dwellers I drew most energy not from mystic power but from outside sources. With my trident, I can also use powers over thunder and lightning. I can raise the tides of water in areas near the sea, causing powerful waves to crash down on my foes. Here, I couldn't do that, but because the air seemed slightly more moist than what they called a “desert,” I could draw water from the air and these land grasses. I created a bubble of water around the extra head. The head appeared to be having a seizure from the electricity and was gasping for air, but I kept both effects up, until the head burned to cinders. The old head looked relieved to have its neck space back. Hmmmm. An idea formed, but I would need to get closer.

Nevras had meanwhile taken to attacking the main body. The same ability that allowed the heads to regrow made a much smaller area ineffective to attack, but he was at a loss as to what to do. “Any suggestions?” he asked. “Just one. Cut off all his heads,” I told him. I dodged one of the thing's head with a flipping back dive. I was flexible, and such a move would work in sea. But I quickly found that it made me stuck on the ground, like a turtle forced upside-down. I couldn't quite figure out how to roll over yet. The Jabberwock thing took advantage of my momentary weakness and bit off my head, neck and all. It seriously hurt, but my head isn't that important. Humans and such are descended from primates, while we've had centuries to develop similar to starfish. I do most of my thinking with my brain, but it's not essential to running my body. Muscle extended, then bone, then brains, eyes, and ears. The others looked visibly shocked, as did the Jabberwock. Nevras grabbed my hand, and pulled me up. “So,” Nevras asked, “what's the plan? Won't cutting off its heads make it more dangerous as it grows more?” I shook my head, “Just trust me on this.” She smiled. Unfortunately, I didn’t know her long enough that I could safely say that I trusted her.

My trident had edges that could be used for slashing, though not as effectively as a sword. Nevras swung, the vorpal blade of his taking off one head and then another and another. My own trident, with difficulty, slashed away at one head. Before long, it had double the heads it originally had. It was becoming increasingly more difficult to fight, or even to dodge the heads. Nevras sidestepped one, then another, but the third time he tripped. He flinched, fully prepared to get eaten, but then it happened. The heads started fighting each other for who got the honor of the meal. They bit each other, until one finally prevailed. The head dove at him, as did the other heads. Before they got anywhere near, the thing toppled over. “No real creature could be designed like this,” I remarked, “you're not real.” As if to verify what I'd said, the dinosaur rapidly petrified then turned to dust. We notified the bounty offices of what happened and delivered the dust as proof, but because they had no genetic information left in this dust, they couldn't technically reward us since the poster said to be “Dead” not “Erased From Existence.” They believed us though, and the bounty was marked as completed.

Ambrosia asked me, “What just happened?” I explained, “There are some things in this world that are not as solid or scary as they originally appear. Some aren't even real.” After that, I passed out from the exertion of combat.

When I awoke, I found the others surrounding me with a serious look on their faces. “What's wrong?” I asked. Ambrosia looked especially stern, “We need to talk about how your sucky coordination put Nevras in danger. Now, I know you haven't been in as many battles as the rest of us, but we're gonna make sure you get trained.” And so, over the next week or so, Aqorm taught me to run faster, though I was not biologically able to keep up with her. It did however, get my body conditioned to running in general. I was taught by Nevras some basic skills like sitting up, how to make jumps as well as the power of a running jump, and in general he put me through workouts to train my body to understand this new reality where I couldn't just swim everywhere.

Ambrosia believed that I should retain my physical skills underwater too, so I wouldn't suddenly forget how to swim. She told me some story called the Caterpillar's Dilemma, where such a thing happened from overthinking. Elias told her that she's referring to the Centipede's Dilemma. All these land creatures look the same to me, so I couldn't tell you the difference. Anyway, she taught me to swim both as a human would, and with my seal hydrid form. She also had me work on making bubbles that filled with

water, and ones that were hollow yet so solid that they could be used as protective fields against physical force. She threw pebbles at this, then steadily rocks, until she had to enlist help from Lilith to throw boulders. She also had me summon multiple bubbles at once, and make them solid as the aforementioned rocks, yet as wet as something called water balloons. Lastly, I was supposed to form multiple bubbles, and hit them with electricity generated by my trident before the bubbles popped on their own.

Zoe taught me gymnastics. Now, Zoe had never at all demonstrated any proficiency for gymnastics, but that didn't stop her! Soon, instead of diving impotently and flopping on the ground, I had figured out how to do cartwheels, somersaults, backflips, break-dancing moves, and some martial arts gymnastics. I was taught how to use my new techniques to dodge, and how to use a few simple movements to block using my trident.

Nevras, Michael, and Azrael believed that I should understand how to fight, so the three of them attacked me until I could at least manage at fighting multiple attackers. In the days to come, they got me to take on the next few bounties myself by declaring it part of their training, while they watched. In lawn chairs. While eating barbecued meat and grilled vegetables. Thanks to me, they claimed the bounty of a Female Soldier, and a giant Siberian tiger called White Blaze.

AMBROSIA

Okay, I admit it. While Selqui was sort of clumsy, we kinda wanted her trained to do the work for us on these bounties. And of course, we were tempted to take all of the money. But since we were reasonable people, after these we agreed to help her, which was good since the next bounty was a real nuisance. Heading to the general direction of Kirin, we went in search of the Annoying Pixie.

They weren't exaggerating. The creature flew at strange angles, dodging our ranged attacks, melee attacks, techniques, and magic. “Hey, listen!” it shouted incessantly, its catchphrase moving from cute and endearing to downright obnoxious. Every now and then, after we had managed to run into each other and nearly gotten slashed or impaled, it said “Watch out!” moments too late.

We tried surrounding it with careful slashes (following the earlier issue, charging at it was out of the question), we tried aiming at it in the air with spells cast all around it. Lilith tried rushing at it and pouncing. It was simply too maneuverable, and dove over or under our attacks at least as well as Ambrosia was able to, but with the added wrinkle of being able to fly. Michael should have been able to manage, but for some reason he looked a lot more delicate lately and moved significantly slower. I didn't know what was going on with him, but he was gonna get chubby. Oh wait, angels can't get fat. Well in any case, he wasn't pulling his weight much. Not that he did much anyway. But still, here was a battle that called for speed, reflexes, and the ability to fly, and he was just sitting there creating Scripts, and not very good ones.

THE WORLD

Azrael and Yazim Jianne finally resolved the situation. “Get everyone to safety,” Azrael warned, but grabbing Yazim Jianne said, “except you, I need you to help.” Yazim's eyebrows raised, “You can't mean... But that's overkill.” Azrael's face became serious, “For the good of humanity, this being **must** die.”

The area around Kirin was a very wide expanse of ice and snow, and the area was in the middle of nowhere. This ritual required preferably thirteen people, but at least two people who knew what they were doing could unlock the ritual. An arrow tipped with pitchblende was procured, and the two of them wove their hands in concert while reciting the words. They said, “तू मुझे मौत के रूप में देखता है, जो मारता है, समय जो कयामत लाता है, कातिलों, प्राचीन दिनों, उपभोग करने के लिए यहाँ आते हैं; शत्रुतापूर्ण सरदारों के इन सभी यजमानों को छोड़कर, चमकता है कि युद्ध के मैदान में किसी को जीवित नहीं छोड़ा जाएगा!” The tip of the arrow began to glow, as the ritual launched the arrow toward the sky. While the sun shone, light like a second sun shone white and focused. The light was so intense that it not only consumed the pixie, but imprinted its shadow in the ground. The ice melted and rocks fused into glass. The energy formed into a cloud resembling a large mushroom. The air and water tainted, and would have been

permanently polluted, if not for the fact that this ritual was always used in conjunction with the other ritual, the Gayatri Mantra. The Brahmastra Sutra was the ultimate weapon of runes, but it was considered incomplete without the ultimate renewal Gayatri Mantra. Those who didn't use both in concert routinely had their minds wiped by Council professionals, so it was pretty much the one thing that still lasted after they fell. The two said the words, " हम इस बात पर गौर करते हैं कि इस ब्रह्मांड का निर्माण किसने किया है; हो सकता है वह हमारे दिमाग को प्रबुद्ध करे ," and then the world was pure again. Like the other ritual, the Gayatri had a profound effect on the land around it. The ice turned into soil in the radius of the effect, and the soil turned to grass. All sense of taint left the area, and the air had a minty smell to it.

A two mile area was wrecked and regenerated, the two casting the ritual knew that such an extreme approach wouldn't gain any bounty, and would likely incur a penalty. Even without the taint left over, this destructive technique was frowned upon. The two rejoined the others. There would be some explaining to do. But it had to be done.

AMBROSIA

We came back to the area around where the Annoying Pixie had been to find that whatever spell had been used, it erased all signs of the critter but a shadow engraved in what was now grass. Apparently, we couldn't collect our bounty for this one either, because they had done something sketchy they wouldn't talk about. Ah, no matter, it was an obnoxious creature, so I'm sure it deserved whatever it got. I stopped myself after that thought. If I continued to kill every creature I came across, would I start to become some sort of serial murderer? Would I start seeing creatures as "monsters" and start going after goblin or orc towns? I resolved after this to do something good to make up for those crimes that nobody called me a murderer for. I know that sounds kinda like penance, but it's not. I wanted to bring the sense of how my life had improved to others. That I was also feeling guilty right now is totally beside the point!

Maybe I could start by sparing a few creatures. The ones like... I pulled One-Eyed Snake, Eye of Doom, and Shy Medusa out of the pile. Each of these said they could be Dead or Alive, but gave a far larger bounty for dead, indicating that the bounty office found them more dangerous to be around than just of kill them. Yes, these were creatures deserving of my mercy.

Before that though, I brutally finished off the Elves in Parsley near Seikai without a second thought despite having Aqorm in our party. I also killed off the Succubus. Winged sexy women who were more beautiful than me needed to be hunted down. We also chased after the Ornery Ostrogoth, which ran much faster than us, and was in the deserts near Goji. Even borrowing horses, we couldn't catch up to this four-legged flightless bird, so our pursuit lasted days, until we finally cornered the creature by herding it to the coast. As fast as it was, it couldn't run across water, so it turned and fought us. The ostrogoth when cornered, tends to peck with its beak. The pecks can either nearly kill the target or barely scratch them, with nothing in between, so it was a struggle to stay healed up with the medicines and healing magic we had, before we basically got killed by the gentlest peck. The wild ostrogoth bit and kicked. But Lilith managed to charm it by showing it some nice greens. The curious bird got closer and closer... then Lilith body-slammed it, and threw a net over it. It was for the best, this cute bird could make someone a nice mount if it ever learned to trust again. We pulled out a feather, and the bird was collected in exchange for our pay. We were up to about 10k Gold on hand, and some in the bank, but for now, we would deposit all but 1500 Gold into the bank, again splitting it up into our personal accounts. All that Gold was heavy, and we had just wandered back from a desert after chasing a freaking bird around.

I was hungry, and seeing Skinny Minotaur on the menu next, ummm I mean the bounty list, we decided to do that. And yes, bounties can be eaten, as long as something with genetic material is placed on the bounty notice. They even understood selling parts of the bounty, since they mainly got paid by the client. And they preferred this, because they had to take time away from their business to process creature parts.

We entered the Hidden Forest southeast of Ghobli and Zuran and wandered again through the confusing pathways. This time, however, we took a route away from Cold

Mountain and those cute mammoths, into a sort of natural maze. After traveling through the maze, heading left and right, north and south, we began to notice that the path was in fact tended by someone. And by that, I mean some of the bushes looked like they had been dead ends until someone or something took an axe to the roots and toppled a section, leaving the fallen brush to rot. The maze was further complicated by a thick mist, a haze that covered all sight of where each path led. We saw a figure up ahead, and I assumed that Lilith had wandered off again. I called out, "Lilith! Stop splitting from the party! We have enough troubles with this mist." But she called out behind me, "I'm right here." But, if she's there, what exactly is growling at me? I moved closer to get a good look. I saw horns like Lilith, but the feet were wrong. Lilith had feet much like her hands, whatever this was had cloven feet. And the tail was all wrong, and it was furrier than Lilith, there were no wings, and this axe... wait, axe?!?

I dodged out of its reach, just as the minotaur swung its axe across, missing being cut apart by only a inch or so. The Skinny Minotaur gave chase, being much faster due to body size compared to the other minotaurs. This guy hadn't the strength advantages of other minotaurs, but he was chasing after me at a running pace, and I barely had time to dart to the right as he swung downward. Normally, from a run, swinging down would be difficult unless you halted midway through the swing, which you'd do naturally if you hit something. But as he looked back and noticed that he had passed us, he tripped over his own weapon as it touched the ground, tumbling to the soil. The others didn't have much trouble taking him down after that, and we cut him into chunks to slow roast with 11 herbs and spices. After having our meal, we returned from the maze and the forest to continue our hunting.

We hunted One-Eyed Snake next. I was told on the bounty notice that the reason for the hunt is that all young and virginal women were afraid of this being. I started giggling. In any case, restraining and capturing this thing was easier said than done. We tried firing Sleep Arrows at it using Zoe's bow, only to realized that it was far more massive than we had originally thought, and its thickness and girth prevented penetration. And so, to capture it, we relied on Aqorm. Aside from her geomancy, she had basic trapping skills, so while we lured it in, we trapped it in various pits and snares wearing it down, until finally, Lilith managed to collect some fluids. We used this to catch the creature alive. The bounty office was not thrilled with us, but ultimately gave us our bounty money.

Then, we tried the Shy Medusa. As everyone knows, medusas like dank dark places like ruins, when they're not statue freaks. This one wouldn't look us in the eye. The nerve! I kept trying to tell her that polite company expected that you make eye contact, and to do otherwise was considered rude or arrogant. She became even more withdrawn at our criticism though, and started staring at the ground. "Let me help her out," said Nevras. And he talked to her at length, trying to get at why she felt so afraid to engage people. The girl, who introduced herself as Euryale, said, "Every time I talk to people, I can't help getting the sense that they want to run from me. I'm hideous!" I looked at her. She had a nice pear shape to her body, she was light-skinned for a snake girl and her face was actually kind of pretty, although it had the look of a girl who hadn't gotten enough sunlight. Her hair was a mess though. The snakes were all tangled around other, and much of them were in her eyes. Grabbing a metal comb used mostly for pets, I began to straighten these snakes in something more manageable.. It was tough, because clearly didn't want to lie down flat, but eventually I gave her a nice part. Some snakes had snarled and were stuck in the comb. "There, now," I told her, "with just a bit of effort, you actually look quite nice! Now let's see your eyes." There was something fascinating about them, they were a golden yellow around the center with purple near the edges in a starburst pattern. The more I looked, the more I became fascinated. Time suddenly passed, and the girl was frowning again and looking down. "You idiots!" Elias scolded me and Nevras, "What possessed you to get a medusa to make eye contact?!?" After calming down, he handed her some dark refractive sunglasses. This suited her new look. "Okay," I told her, "we've got a quest to go on, but we're gonna send you to some people who should help you fit in better. I am told that after the initial fear of an unmanageable medusa wore off, she gradually got to meet people, and eventually became one of the

bounty people, since they needed folks who could restrain powerful creatures. Even today we still get postcards from her. She appears to be happily married now.

The last bounty was known as the Eye of Doom, but she later told us her name was Emily. We found Emily only by riding atop Bahamut, and she was a girl floating atop a cloud. The girl had reddish-brown hair and was built like a dancer, lean and probably very flexible. The girl was crying, and wouldn't stop while we were with her. "What's wrong?" I asked. She pointed down at her cloud, "This thing! I can't be normal because this cloud keeps glowering at people." Glowering? What did she mean? Only, I quickly found out when a massive eye opened in the center of this cloud.

It occurred to me that many of these creatures we had faced before had some sort of thing wrong with their eye, either they were lacking one, or it was something to could curse or threaten people. It seemed like so many people were worried about public opinion, and whether they were popular or not. As for me, I wasn't gonna let this girl cry over how she thought other people saw her. "Don't worry, we'll take care of this thing," I assured her. I ordered the others to attack just the cloud with Wind and Fire magic, evaporating the cloud and blowing it away. She started to fall, but we caught her with Bahamut. Bahamut grunted, as she didn't want yet another traveler on her back. "There now," I said, "see? It's all gone." But she cried all the more, "No it's not~!" As her tears fell, the giant cloud reappeared. This would be endless!

"Hey ummm," suggested Nevras, "maybe this isn't such a bad thing. I mean, the real problem isn't actually the cloud, right? It's that people are afraid of you. How about if we just try to help you fit in?" And so, we took her to Kushiyama, a town filled with people, and we taught Emily some basic social skills, like how to talk to people without scaring them. Emily explained that while her eye cloud had a stern glare, it was friendly. She even let people pet it. Gradually, she did figure out how to fit in. "Hey, Emily," I suggested, "you're a bounty. Would you like to go to the bounty offices, and apologize for causing trouble?" She nodded, and we pulled one strand of hair stuck to her outfit, and used it to take her to the bounty office. After a fashion, she was forgiven of her crimes, and she joined our medusa. The two of them are a married couple of weird creatures. Apparently, this wedding had a high number of creatures in attendance, from goblins to centaurs to beholders, it kinda brought out all the weird folk.

More importantly, our quota was done. We could face Cthulhu as a bounty. Returning to the wanted posters in Phoenix, we grabbed the poster. Surely, this time we would succeed where others failed. Cthulhu's portal was just above an island to the south. It was not widely known, but the Elder Formless, unlike simple Monsters, were each governed by an element. For example, Cyäegha could exist in cold places only, because of being governed by fire. Likewise, Cthulhu was governed by water, and thus could only fully awaken when his home R'yleh was no longer submerged in the waves. Right now, all that was present was his portal. Azrael tried to use her Exorcism to close the gate. "*Rin Pyou Tou Sha Kai Chin Retsu Zai Zen*!" she shouted, and a circle began to form around the portal, gradually shrinking it.

It was not in time, however. From the portal emerged some tentacles. The portal closed and the tentacles severed, flopping on the island grass. On any other creature, such tentacles would start to die once severed from the main body. But this was an Elder Formless. A shadowy outline extended from each tentacle, until the merged together to form the shape of a body. From shadow into solid form, a lesser version of Cthulhu formed where the portal had been. This was only a fraction of Cthulhu's power, but unlike in his home plane, this could not permanently be killed, only banished. And it looked huge, enough that I wondered whether we would represent any more of a threat to it than mere bugs. The Elder Formless's height was beyond comprehension, such that forced a crouch to so much as see us, or else this head would be somewhere in the sky or maybe even space. I cannot begin to describe him, other than to say "tall" and "vaguely-aquatic." Whenever I tried to describe more, things sort of fell apart. I couldn't tell you what color his skin was, because it was a greenish-grey not found anywhere on this universe. I had trouble comprehending the power of this Being either, for my brain was paralyzed by fear. An idle wave of his hands was creating cosmic changes. The stars were moving, the tides lowered, and Cthulhu tried to reopen his own portal. When we

were found blocking this attempt, Cthulhu tried to remove us instead. And yet, despite his great power, I trusted in God. God had said these Elder Formless had no real power in this world. Which made me even more scared of God. Just how powerful would you have to be to scoff at the power of a thing like this?!?

Meteors rained down around us, thunder and lightning struck, great darkness came, and powers that weren't seen for centuries threatened us. Cthulhu at one point summoned a writhing mass of tentacles from thin air, at another point the blood from Cthulhu's hands being slashed pooled into some creepy creatures that are best not mentioned in polite company. Their horrible twisted forms hounded us, and we dared not face them. In the days to come, they would appear in my nightmares along with Cthulhu. I would be driven almost to the depths of madness, worried that when the stars aligned, the New Earth was doomed. Doomed, I say. I said earlier that Cthulhu was weak to water, but this is not to say water magic would hurt him (at all). Elder Formless were largely immune to runes, and it took an entire ocean to even suppress his power. We had no hope at all, from what I could see.

We persisted against his magical effects, but his power was putting strain on Elias to form defensive shields. Then Selqui spoke, “I am a student of Elder Lore, I can help out.” And she began to watch what Cthulhu did, then countered with equally creepy effects. Shedding her own blood, she flicked it at the horrid gibbering servants Cthulhu had summoned. The blood turned black when it hit them. Very black, and their bodies began to fester and wear away. She stretched out her hand, and muttered some strange words like “*Mgah'ehye ya nwnglui mgahnnn yogor ng f' mgah'ehye yog nog,*” and a mouth opened within her palm. While it had teeth, instead of a tongue, it was a series of black tentacles. The tentacles detached themselves from her, and the Elder Formless scoffed, and spoke the same gibberish tongue, “Bah! gof'n's ah'gotha. Mgah'ehye ya ymg' mgah'n'ghft mgleth r'luh. Ymg' mgep mg hope!” As the creature continued to talk, even to say that we had no hope, as Selqui explained, I noticed words like 'hope', 'love', 'play', 'courage', and the like were missing from this creature's native vocabulary, and wound up being borrow words. Cthulhu broke apart the tentacles with zero effort, and eyed the girl who had made trouble. Selqui wasn't done yet. She summoned a Monster with the words, “*Flowey, Y' ymg' uln, l' nog fahf agl*!” A small looking sunflower thing with a face popped up from the ground. That was it? A tiny little weed? And yet, looking at that thing's face, I was suddenly deeply disturbed. More so when that *thing* that I had previously called a flower began to laugh. The stringy high-pitched notes of its laughter made me think of someone in a mental ward, far more than the cute little plant I had decided it was at first. Roots sprang up from the ground of the island, and a circle of sunflower bullets tore holes in the body of the Elder Formless. After a few seconds, it was no more, finished off by this insane flower. That was it then, it was over, time to collect our...

GOD

I, the God of the universe and all therein, have mostly been silent in this section. While Ambrosia wanted to spend time with her man, and make sure he wasn't going to leave, I let her do her thing, even though it was not her official mission. I let them goof off and enjoy themselves, knowing she would eventually finish, once she was sure he would follow her. And so it is, with many of those called sinners, they fear I have forgotten them. I will always be with you, even if it seems I've left. To Friedrich Nietzsche, whose father had died when he was young, “God is dead,” he said. But this is a glimpse of his true feelings. Many of the great atheists had an absent, cold, or abusive father figure. But I am not going anywhere, even if the form you associate with me should die, leave, or appear to hate you. And now, I shall tell you what happened from my perspective, since those of the others is flawed by their sudden and untimely demise.

Those group had less than one minute to rejoice over their victory. Monsters such as Flowey, were Shadows given form by their tie to a single story. Flowey, for example, was from the *Undertale* video game, and was a Monster made from a flower template (mostly). It was powerful, and able to survive by spreading its roots, but it could be defeated. Monsters didn't die except from First Material or by defeat in their home plane,

but they could be unsummoned by defeat or by slaying their summoner. Elder Formless on the other hand, were not subject to any commands by their summoner, and when defeated, they would simply respawn nearby. And if an Elder Formless ever became fully released, if the stars were all right, and their source of power unleashed, living things believed that it would be an apocalyptic event.

While Flowey destroyed the body of Cthulhu, a moment later, his body reformed above them. With a murmur of words unheard since ancient times, Cthulhu spoke, and a cloud of death formed, drawing the very air out of the lungs of those below him. Selqui survived because her lungs were designed to equally deal with air and water, and so it stands to reason that she could hold her breath. Azrael survived because she was immune to all sorts of instant death attacks. And Zoe adjusted to no air, because she was eternal.

Cthulhu ignored Zoe for now because she didn't seem powerful enough to take him, and because trying to kill her would probably be wasted effort. Instead, the Elder Formless crystallized the power of his mind into an enormous sharpened gemstone, and lobbed it at Azrael. She dodged it, and dodged another one, then Cthulhu caught her off guard with a sudden blast of Void. Her body turned to dust on the spot. Against Selqui, after cutting off limbs didn't work, Cthulhu launched thousands of marble-sized balls of solid darkness. She used her newfound training to dodge these, only to be pushed back. She became so riddled with holes that any normal person would bleed out. But she stood up, “These are only flesh wounds.” The Elder Formless looked shocked for a moment, then scowled and said, “Determination.” She was cut in several places by razor sharp winds, and crushed by tentacles, but she kept her hold on her summon and fought back. Such bravery... only made her more challenging to kill. Eventually Cthulhu prevailed.

As Ambrosia was on vacation, so was I. Ordinarily, this meant waiting until the trouble was over, then simply resetting things. But as I quickly found, the trouble didn't end just because I wanted a break. Cthulhu, like many of the Elder Formless, was a sadist. Seeing that he couldn't properly kill Zoe, he took the opportunity to traumatize her. There was no tentacle rape going on (Cthulhu was a gentleman, unlike those *other* Elder Formless), but then there didn't have to be. Cthulhu penetrated her mind (literally), and forced her to view disturbing images for hours on end. While this was going on, Cthulhu raised the others, only to torture them to death, and then raise them again and again. ***Reset.*** They were safe, just before they set out on the bounty to fight Cthulhu.

At once, I felt a presence. Translating his speech from R'lyehian, I heard, “Just what do you think you are doing here? These are **my** prey.” I shook my head. I had no reason for the theatrics I used on humans here, so I spoke normally, “I beg to differ, they are on my quest, and they accepted you as a bounty. They naturally fall under my protection.” The Elder Formless roared with laughter, “We shall see about that.” And then I felt more than heard the words ***Undo***, and they were back in Cthulhu's clutches. Zoe had been freaked out enough, and unlike the others, she couldn't ever forget her pain, so I said ***Protect*** on her, flooding her with a golden light to shield her from all types of molestation. I could only use this one target to full effect, because the more people I tried to protect, the more dispersed this effect would be. And yet, he tried quite a number of things before giving up. I appeared to her, telling her to sleep while she was to be sent dreams to help her cope with the disturbing treatment she had received. In the days to come, I also made sure that she recovered. “Blast you!” Cthulhu screamed, “That was to be my conquest.” He tried to Undo this, and realized he couldn't even do that. I tried ***Reset*** once more, only to have him quickly Undo that. And so we struggled back and forth fighting for our vision of events, until finally he had enough. ***Erase***. He wiped out roughly about 200+ pages of character description, wiping those characters from everyone's memory. It didn't happen. The author probably died of bad health from eating too many corn chips and ramen noodles, and not having enough sleep and fresh air. The story was never published, and nobody knew who Ambrosia, Selqui, Nevras, Elias, Aqorm, Azrael, Zoe, Lilith, Michael, and Yazim Jianne were. And then, he came for me. ***Erase***. Only, I smirked. Part of what makes me God, and not a mere Elder Formless, is that I exist without creepy cultists or any worshipers alive at all. Before the barest speck of light in the universe, I sat alone in the Void. This upstart had underestimated me. My power had (mainly self-imposed) limits, but my being was not something that could

simply be wished away. If all the atheists ever chanted, “We don't believe in you,” it wouldn't make an iota of difference. A God that is God, has no beginning and no end, for what nothing made so also nothing can unmake. Not fully understanding, he tried again and again. ***Unmake. Destroy. Annihilate. Eliminate. Extinguish***.

My smirk became a giggle, then a full laugh. “You don't get it, do you? When did you come into being?” He explained, “I am as old as the stars, my power is awesome and limitless, I...” I had to interrupt his self-important speech, “Old as the stars? Hardly! You were conceived by the mind of Howard Phillips Lovecraft in the American pulp magazine *Weird Tales* in 1928 under the title 'The Call of Cthulhu.' I have a copy here if you want to read it.” I showed him the copy. Then I showed him R. J. Ivankovic's *The Call of Cthulhu for Beginning Readers*, a cute Dr Seuss version. “**Noooooooooo!!! That's not true, that's impossible!**” he screamed. I could have easily managed to Erase him, undoing Weird Tales, undoing all of Lovecraft's and August Derleth's work. But then I realized something. Without having existed, how would he ever repent of his crimes? And how could Ambrosia's group collect her bounty? ***Revoke.*** He tried to use his eldritch powers to defy me, but to no avail. He was just a big giant now, not something to be feared beyond his strength. ***Undo.*** The author breathed again, and so also did their work. Ambrosia became known, if only to a select few people.

AMBROSIA

I looked up and saw the Elder Formless known as Cthulhu. We had faced him before, and I was frightened, but apparently, something had changed since then. For one thing, he was no longer nearly as big. His seemingly cosmic height had shrunken down to the size of a skyscraper. Somehow too, he was no longer indescribable. His colors had dulled from what they were before to very clearly a color of green like a jade plant. My mind, while still suffering from trauma of what he had done, was recovering, and was no longer paralyzed by fear. I could describe him as a sort of giant man with green skin, wings like a bat, arms and legs, and tentacles near his mouth. Earlier, he could also extend tentacles from elsewhere and do all kinds of creepy things, but that was over now. Now, he was trying to punch us or stomp on us. And he was missing! Now, he was weak to Water spells so Zoe and Selqui blasted away at him. Selqui could draw water from nearby sources, so she never stopped until this thing was on its knees. Now, he was struggling, even to hurt us. And now, Azrael just used an Exorcism, binding him away. She touched the bounty sheet to the circle, as it faded, and was pleased to receive a note stating «**Congratulations! You have sealed away the Elder Formless, Cthulhu! See back for more details**.» So we did, and the back said, «The bounty office is not responsible for award items exceeding Super Rare status, award money exceeding 1 Million Gold, or any titles or property. The bounty office is a business, not a charity. For such awards, show this completed bounty to its original client in order to redeem. **Client Name/Address:** His Royal Highness, Charis of Phoenix, Phoenix Castle.» Cheapskates!

Forget it. We'd save that reward for later. We were going somewhere to forget all of this. Half of us had issues after what that... thing had done to us. We needed to take a vacation. And suddenly, I wanted to do some volunteer work to feel better about myself.

YAZIM JIANNE

The others were enjoying their victory, but I noticed there was a stray amount of dimensional energy left over from the rift the Cthulhu made to enter our world. It occurred to me that at some point I had collected this energy (which I did now), and at some point I had made the Transport Coin that I gave to Ambrosia in her past. I had to rush the job because the portal was about to disappear, so I wound up making the same crude design when I had first seen it. While the others were deciding what to do next, I gave Selqui one of my hooded robes and sent her on a round trip back in time, to the first time Ambrosia had entered the Mountain of Fate. “I did it!” she announced triumphantly, as she returned to the present. But since timelines had been changed, I already forgot what she had done. I congratulated her anyway, giving her a hug, and thanking her for helping me... somehow. We got on the ship, and rejoined the others.

CHAPTER 12

In which showtunes are sung, and lovers in triangles is not on square.

AQORM

We had just finished building a bamboo water system for a town with polluted water. It was Qurac, and the desert air sucked. They had some strange religious beliefs but they kept to themselves. And they had an interesting language. Saying “Hi, how are you?” in print looked something like «नमस्ते आप कैसे हैं?» while instead the vocal language sounds something like “היי מה שלומך” with a few other languages thrown in. Elias said the vocal language was actually a mix of Hebrew, Aramaic, Amharic, and Persian Farsi. But it's hard to jumble all of this together, and it mostly sounds like Hebrew.

And no, we weren't being cheap, bamboo has antibiotic properties. All the latrine water would now be significantly cleaner, so it wouldn't chance mixing with the drinking water as it went to plant crops, and all the drinking water that had been tainted was now drinkable. They started singing “(There Can Be Miracles) When You Believe” from *Prince of Egypt* in their own language, sounding like this.

בלילות רבים התפללנו
.ללא שום הוכחה שמישהו יכול לשמוע
בליבנו שיר מלא תקווה שבקושי הבנו,
עכשיו אנחנו לא מפחדים
למרות שאנחנו יודעים שיש הרבה מה לחשוש
היינו להרים הרים הרבה לפני שידענו שאנחנו יכולים ...

יכול להיות שיש ניסים כאשר אתה מאמין
למרות התקווה היא חלשה זה קשה להרוג
מי יודע איזה נסים אתה יכול להשיג
כאשר אתה מאמין איכשהו אתה
אתה תהיה כאשר אתה מאמין

בתקופה זו של פחד כאשר התפילה הוכיחה פעמים רבות לשווא
,הופ נראתה כמו ציפורי הקיץ. טסתי במהירות
אבל עכשיו אני עומד כאן בלב מלא כל כך שאני לא יכולה להסביר
חיפשתי אמונה ומילות דיבור שמעולם לא חשבתי שאומר

יכול להיות שיש ניסים כאשר אתה מאמין
למרות התקווה היא חלשה זה קשה להרוג
מי יודע איזה נסים אתה יכול להשיג
כאשר אתה מאמין איכשהו אתה
אתה תהיה כאשר אתה מאמין

אני אשיר לאלוהים כי הוא ניצח בפאר
אני אשיר לאלוהים כי הוא ניצח בפאר

מי כמוך, הו אלוהים, בין השמים
באהבתך, אתה מוביל את האנשים שאתה פדה
באהבתך, אתה מוביל את האנשים שאתה פדה
אשירה אשירה אשירה
אני אשיר לאלוהים כי הוא ניצח בפאר
אני אשיר לאלוהים כי הוא ניצח בפאר
מי כמוך, הו אלוהים, בין השמים
באהבתך, אתה מוביל את האנשים שאתה פדה
באהבתך, אתה מוביל את האנשים שאתה פדה
אשירה אשירה אשירה

יכול להיות שיש ניסים כאשר אתה מאמין
למרות התקווה היא חלשה שלה קשה להרוג
מי יודע איזה נסים אתה יכול להשיג
כשאתה מאמין
איכשהו אתה
עכשיו אתה
... אתה תהיה כאשר אתה מאמין
אתה תהיה כאשר אתה מאמין

They were apparently fond of showtunes. I was a bit miffed though. True, this was a miracle to those with bad water, but I kinda would like a thank you too.

Why were we doing this, you ask? Ambrosia, who was obviously stalling for time, was apparently bored of entertaining herself and wanted to do something for the world, I guess. I mean, this was a "teamwork-building training." Which it was. But this was totally a pretext. And everyone probably knew it but Nevras, who trusted her too much.

We didn't dare talk to her about it though. I go too close to Ambrosia one time and she snapped and me, and I listened as Elias explained about how hedgehogs get cold in the winter and have to get close to each other or they freeze. I understood. I should avoid Ambrosia when she doesn't want to talk, because I'll get a lecture about porcupines.

I suppose it felt good to be doing good for its own sake. But Elias was walking away from our group. Why? "What's wrong?" I asked. Elias shook his head and scowled, "I should feel something after helping others, but I feel empty. Aqorm, I know you probably want a family someday, but in my heart, I yearn to know the meaning of this universe, its deepest secrets. Like, who is God really? When and how did everything begin? And why? Is history recurring or linear? And is there lost history, or even deliberately suppressed? I can't suddenly stop asking questions because a baby cries, and though I'd help feed it, I'd be miserable most of my life." I understood, and told him so. And then I said, "Look, you love me, and I know it. I want to you to be by my side when I have my first time. I think that I want Lilith but I love you as well. Will you join me and her in that tent over there?" There was a tent nearby that said, «यौन तम्बू» which Elias had translated earlier as being set aside for precisely this purpose. He also claimed that there was a strange lingual pun, since it also meant, "A tent of wisdom." So I needed such a wise person inside the tent with me.

ELIAS

In the beginning, God created Adam. We typically think of Adam as a him, and I may probably say that by accident, but a careful read of the text usually yields that Adam is a singular "they" and only after having the ribs removed is there reference to "he". In fact, *tsela* is used both to mean the rib of something or its side, like the side of a tabernacle. In other words, Adam was a two-sided being which God believed it was not good for them to be alone, and so made two people from one androgynous one. And so it was that Adam had Eve as his other half. This is where the expression, "joined at the hip" comes from.

Before Eve, though, Adam's mate was Lilith, who was made as Adam was. The first humans were dated by scientists around 7 million years ago, but Adam and Lilith, on the other hand were much, much older; they were immortal beings, not simply evolved primates. It was only when Adam split off into Eve that he became like other mortal creatures. Before that, they were around when the first life became distinct from mere bacteria, and there to name all of them. Bottom line, these were beings that were old when the oldest life was born.

Lilith began to fight with Adam saying, "I will not lie below." And Adam said, "I will not lie beneath you, but only on top. For you are fit only to be in the bottom position, while am to be in the superior one." Lilith responded, "We are equal to each other inasmuch as we were both created from the earth." But they would not listen to one another. So she ran off, from what I heard.

Looking at this scene, while Lilith is not the two-bodied androgyne human of her namesake, not much had changed. She still favored the top.

GOD

I have a small confession to make. Lilith actually is born from the original Lilith. In the beginning these humans were dual-bodied beings made in my image (the text here means spiritual image), which means being “on top” has a totally different implication as humans think, because Lilith had a female front and a male rear (nothing much has changed there either). Since Adam and Lilith both preferred to be sexually dominant, they couldn't see eye to eye, and eventually Lilith ran off. Adam prayed to me, saying, “The one you gave me has run away.” And so, I sent three angels of medicine, Snvi, Snsvi, and Smnglof to pursue her.

I told Adam, “If Lilith agrees to come back, fine. If not Lilith must permit one hundred of children to die every day.” The angels left me and pursued Lilith, where they found Lilith in the middle of the sea, and they told Lilith my words, but Lilith did not wish to return. The angels said, “We shall drown you in the sea.”

“Leave me!” Lilith said. “I was created only to cause sickness to infants. If the infant is male, I have dominion over him for eight days after his birth, and if female, for twenty days.” When the angels heard Lilith's words, they insisted Lilith go back. But Lilith swore to them by the name of the living and eternal God: “Whenever I see you or your names or your forms in an amulet, I will have no power over that infant.” Lilith also agreed to have one hundred of their children die every day. Accordingly, every day one hundred demons perish, and for the same reason, people write those angels' names on the amulets of young children. When Lilith sees the names, Lilith remembers their oath, and the child recovers. I wanted to help her, but she wouldn’t listen.

Ages passed, and Lilith grew sick of this practice, having not lost her immortality like the other humans that I split into male and female. They wanted to stop killing children, so I made them fall into a deep sleep. Leaving their body and mind dead on the table, I put Lilith's heart in a jar, and I extracted her soul into a demon's body. After Belial, she was my second attempt to make a demon with a working heart and soul. I wanted her to forget the pain of her former life, and have a happy life instead. But the other demons rejected her, and I despaired that she also would not find love.

ELIAS

Lilith proceeded to remove Aqorm's clothes. Aqorm wore a loose blue dress today, and as we discovered from our time in Hell, not a scrap underneath. Lilith next undressed herself while Aqorm undressed me. The entire time, Lilith looked at me not at all. To her, men were like blocks of wood, not sexually interesting. I imagine she might be interested in an angel, but an ordinary human like me had not enough for her. She devoted all of her attention to Aqorm. Likewise, I wasn't really interested in mating with a demon. I had read too many Bible and Torah passages about how sex basically joins two people, and I had no desire for this. As far as I could see, Aqorm had one lover who had two bodies, much like the story I told just now about Adam. Male and female.

As I didn't want a child, I remained in temple garments. I instead did what I could to keep Aqorm happy and loved by being emotionally supportive. I kissed her, I held her, and I made her feel special while Lilith started licking her junk. I read Aqorm's body language, and gave Lilith hints on what Aqorm wanted to do next while Lilith went down on her. I didn't feel totally unnecessary, even when Lilith essentially was able to act as the male and the female in this threesome, because I was a good interpreter. All the same, gradually it seemed like she was warming up to Lilith more than me. In days to come, she would probably count on Lilith instead as someone to talk to, which was okay I suppose. I had academic projects to do, after all.

Aqorm was all about having fun. She had lived for far too long in a mansion doing the same boring things, and Lilith on top of having some similarities was also a demon. So between the two of them, the first thing they wanted to do was the most depraved sex they could think of.

Thankfully, neither of them had much imagination, so it wound up being basically oral sex, anal sex (Lilith was careful not to penetrate too much since her tail was quite long), and very healthy doses of BDSM. As I was finally feeling slightly obsolete, I helped tie both of them together in a double fisherman's knot, and then I grabbed a book

out of my backpack. «*Eating People is Wrong* by Malcolm Bradbury» it read on the cover. It, along with *Missionary Position: Mother Theresa in Theory and Practice* by Christopher Hitchens, *The Manly Art of Knitting* by Dave Fougner, *Mommy Drinks Because You're Bad* by some religious children's book press, and *Fancy Coffins to Make Yourself* by Dale Powers were books I found at a local bookstore for five for one Gold. I figured it would take them longer to get out, since the double fisherman is also known as an impossible knot due to its tendency to pull together tighter. It mainly was undone by being cut, which it looked like they eventually managed. Aqorm had a small hairclip that unfolded into a knife, so by leaning her head towards her hand she was able to secure something with which to saw herself free. Lilith had an even easier time, as her tail was able to cut these ropes loose and her claws did the rest. While they were tied though, they did a fair amount of struggling. And by struggling, I mean rubbing against each other. After becoming freed, they didn't even bother going anywhere. I pulled up a chair and watched them, turning a page every now and then. Aqorm started stabbing Lilith with assorted knives, and Lilith scratched at Aqorm like a cat, but eventually, they got serious. Lilith, again like a cat, started licking at Aqorm's nether regions with her tongue. She started drinking her breasts. Elves are always lactating even when not pregnant, it is an adaptation for raising children in event of adoption. Lilith entered her with her tail, and pulled the appendage in and out of her, drawing fresh blood before filling her up.

They still had so much to try, so they tried a number of sex positions, some of which looked painful. Lilith had sex standing up, holding her up while she thrust her tail inside her, and got her in the ass a few times too, just because in this position it was easy to do. Next came a number of positions straight out of a sex manual for "What not to do if you aren't some sort of super race that can heal quickly, or prepped for four months of physical therapy." The Wheelbarrow. The Butter Churner. The Spider. The Snow Angel. Many of these were male-female positions which meant these two had to be creative and bump and grind against each other, or Lilith had to maneuver her tail a bit. Sometimes that was impossible, and sometimes they had to abandon a position as it looked like it wouldn't work properly. After trying all of that, they collapsed in a heap.

After all of that, Lilith had to have gotten Aqorm pregnant. Holding my hands in a certain position, I said a prayer, "*Diagnose*!" Her entire body glowed a blue color while I touched just above her pelvis. The blue glow collected and turned into a small blue circle glowing right near where her uterus was. After a second, a blue control line appeared. In a few more moments, either the blue control line would fade meaning no pregnancy, or another line would appear, forming a cross. Not it mattered. After seeing what I saw, I was pretty sure those two would keep at it until they had a pregnancy, and possibly quite a bit after. Indeed, they were continuing even as I explained all this.

Aqorm wasn't pregnant. So they spent the better part of six hours getting her very pregnant. Ultimately, I realized that elf and demon genetic material doesn't mix well, so I helped out. I used aura abilities to help their compatibility, also giving her a very good pelvic massage in the process. Now she was pregnant.

AMBROSIA

I was curious about these people, and wanting to buy more time with Nevras, convinced him that we needed to stick around. He seemed to read my enthusiasm, and since we were spending time together in this town, we decided to enjoy it. We were going to book a room in the local inn, but the innkeeper shook his head. He said, which Elias translated as, "You have saved our village, so you will stay with our family and our people. You are welcome here any time." He ushered us in to the back entrance of the inn, where his wife and daughter cooked the food. He said a prayer for the meal, " בשם אלוהים, המעלה, הנותן, הנדיב! אלוהים הוא אלוהים! לכן אנו עובדים את אלוהים, שעשה את הבריאה החיה, ואת צדקת הגלום המתגלמת בטהור, במים, ובצמחים הבריאים, הכוכבים, הארץ, וכל החפצים הטובים. ברוך אתה, אדוננו, מלך היקום, מי יוצר סוגים שונים של מזון. " I wondered why it was so long, but it wasn't a Jewish prayer.

The food was... different. No, not, any strange meats. It seemed overly restrictive. We could tell they were holding nothing back in terms of giving us their full meal and indeed it was a feast. But it was basically a feast of vegetables. Milk. Fish. Eggs. It had curries,

crepes, and dishes rich in butter and cheese. But there was no goat, no beef, no chicken, or lamb served. And halfway through the meal, a pig was set upon a pyre, knocked senseless with a blow to its head, drained it of blood, and roast it over the roaring fire before taking it off and rinsing it slowly with the clean water we'd helped them get. “What was that all about?” I asked, as they proceeded to carve the meat into pieces. They carefully divided the entire pig into enough for all of us except themselves to finish the animal, and urged us to not waste any. Elias asked, and they explained to him. He said, “They say that they are trying to follow a right example. The people of Qurac used to be much more violent, but now worship under Sakun, a mix of Judaism, Zoroastrianism, and other religions. They accept the Sumerian deities like An, Enlil, Eriskigal, Inanna, Utu, Nammu, Ninhursag, and Enki as 'lesser gods', concepts that are important to regular life, but not ever to be worshiped, as they only respect the Supreme God, as do the Jews. They also see 'false gods' like Moloch (deity of child sacrifice), Baal (deity of fertility cults), especially Ahriman (deity of falsehood and deception), and any idols as abhorrent and only able to make one unclean. And there are also angels and djinn, but these are only slightly above humans. They believe that the Supreme God whom they call Ahura Mazda, asked Yima, the good shepherd, to receive his law and rule the land. When he refused, Yima instead was charged with to rule over and nourish the earth, to see that the living things prosper. He did so, and the Earth became a paradise. But then, humans were tempted by the image of false gods, and believed in the untruth of Ahriman. When the Earth was young, humans consumed water, then plants, then milk. But they were tempted by meat, and became addicted to causing pain to other life. They believe in eating very little meat besides fish and shellfish, not eating from any animal that has also given them milk or eggs, not eating anything too holy to sacrifice, and nothing among the evil animals. The idea is to treat all life well, in hopes that one day humans will not be required to eat meat to live. So any animals killed are rare, killed as painlessly as possible, and must not be animals that have already been used as pets or for eggs or for milk. Pigs are in the gray zone, because they are sometimes pets or sacred animals, but were sacrifice animals in the past, and many Middle Eastern cultures thought them unclean or contemptible. Precisely because they were in such gray area, the Sakun decided that they would be sacrifice animals, but they would not eat the animal, so this is a meal specifically for guests. We must not waste any.” I asked, “But why did they dump water on it like that? And what are 'evil' animals?” Elias explained after translating, “They say that fire and water are sacred, and for cleansing. Being clean is very important to them. As for evil animals, insects are generally seen at odds with the goodness of the land, as they eat plants and such. A good example are locusts, which consume entire crops. Snakes, frogs, and rats are also considered noxious creatures as they kill or spread disease. They won't eat such animals, but they will often kill them.”

We enjoyed our meal. The pork was very simply seasoned (we weren't supposed to enjoy it), but was still okay and safe to eat. The fish and veggies on the other hand, were very tasty. We had zucchini fritters with mint and feta, eggplant with pomegranate and mint dressing, potato pancakes with assorted veggies mixed in, we had some rice dishes, and a great deal of cheese dishes. Then there were a dizzying variety of seafood dishes, everything from local fish to shrimp and squid. Their food also had a pretty decent amount of thyme in it. I wondered where they got all this food, but then I remembered the huge oasis near the town, and realized that aside from the water in town, they had some ready sources for farming and fishing. They had figured out how to not only survive but flourish in a land that was mostly sand. Given the hardships all around them, it was amazing how cheerful they seemed. But even before we helped, they seemed content.

They agreed to set beds for us tonight, so we explored the town some more. Having heard of Middle Eastern culture in the past, I sorta expected all the women to wear modest clothing or something. I dunno why I expected that, except they seemed to have a lot of other laws. They observed Jewish and Zoroastrian rules of ritual purity, refusing to touch unclean people or unclean animals. I'd seen the Jewish law before, and it was just over 612 laws! Just imagine, this had those plus some more. It was according to the law of charity that commanded them to help strangers as they also have done no harm, and to help the poor or needy. This is why everyone was so welcoming.

I hadn't seen much dress code while we were building the water system, and I didn't see it when we were guests at the house. Quite the opposite actually. The daughter at the inn wore a lacy black outfit that showed quite a bit of her figure. And the average person on the street wore little more than some casual outfit designed to be lightweight for hot weather. Sakun had some pretty heavy Jewish influence from what I could see, so while dress code was no longer about shame or modesty, one thing was all of the married women were wearing wigs or bandannas to cover their hair except in the presence of their immediate family. Dress code had relaxed, but the town had pretty clear distinctions between male and female, and there was no crossdressing. It also had distinctions between the Sakun people and outsiders, for the men wore caps to cover their heads, and both genders dressed in fabrics that had been spun out of the nearby desert plants.

The humans could also easily be distinguished from djinn. Djinn were a type of spirit that could be good, evil, or a mix. Unlike the Sakun people, they didn't seem to follow these same dress codes, or any rules actually. Djinn women were often dressed like tomboys, with harem pants and just a short blouse. And while none of the Sakun was barefoot, the djinn seemed to think nothing of it since they were able to walk above the ground, and none of the males cared about being bare-chested. Even without different styles of dress, you could kinda tell they weren't the same as others. I mean, they often had red or blue or green skin! The ones that did have a yellowish tone to their skin still contrasted by the bizarre shades of their hair color, and beyond that with their eyes which gleamed as bright and intense as the moon on a clear night.

The whole deal with djinn granting wishes was an overstatement. Djinn routinely slept in their lamps, rings, and urns. Rubbing these would do little or nothing to secure a wish, it would only wake them up and they might even be pissed and try to curse you! They would only grant these if they managed to get themselves trapped for thousands of years, and someone got them out. People often think there is some limit, like three, to the wishes but honestly that's up to the discretion of the djinn. Another false thing was that they return to the container once the wishes are done, or that they can only grant wishes for others. Djinn are capable of using powers on themselves, it's just that their personal requests were small scale wishes. Wishes for others on the other hand could actually alter reality. There were a few limits put in place, or laws to djinn, because it wasn't that they couldn't grant such wishes. It was that they shouldn't. A djinn asked such a wish by others must refuse to grant it. Djinn had laws which were punished by stripping them of their power, or the wish would simply fail.

1. Thou canst not wish to make more djinn. Djinn are to be *born*, not made.
2. Thou must not wish to rule over the realms over death *or* life.
3. Thou must not wish to rule over the Heaven, the Earth, or the Waters Below.
4. Thou canst not wish to be like God. It is beyond the power of djinn, and will destroy them entirely to attempt.
5. Remember that you are creatures of nature. Thou must not harm nature.
6. The heart and mind are not to touch, for therein lies free will.
7. Thou must obey the djinn as they obey. Any rules the djinn mentions are law.
8. Honor the Sabbath of the djinn. No wishes will be granted on this day.
9. Respect the laws of marriage.
10. Thou shall not wish to make the djinn mortal.

The second one was interesting. The djinn could wish a person back to life once, and even resurrect masses of people. They could not however raise someone whose body had rotted or been destroyed, for this was the domain of God. Nor could they kill life beyond the point of revival. Interestingly, the djinn could give humans a touch that could restore life and kill it. But the key word is *and,* for any life returned this way risked the death of another. As for the seventh, this meant that if the djinn gave you only three wishes, you could not wish for more. The eighth wish meant djinn couldn't grant wishes on Saturday, though they wouldn't be punished (they simply were unable to do so).

Also contrary to what you might think, djinn were able to marry. They were considered of all races and of any religion, although they typically stayed out of such matters. A djinn who married a human became tied to humanity, and lost the strong blue or green tones to their skin and much of their wish-granting. They typically adopted the

customs of their spouse, so I saw them cover their wild hair with a dull brown wig and adopted Sakun dress code. It was still possible to pick them out because of their intense eyes, and walking in midair didn't help them blend either. I cannot imagine they wanted this fate since it seemed like a loss of freedom, but I did see a few of them playing at being wives/husbands of humans. Such marriages were temporary though, because the djinn could not become mortal, nor the human another djinn.

ELIAS

After a fashion, we wound up visiting the temple. It was my goal to visit all of the world's temples, and so far we'd made good progress. I wasn't the only one though. I had seen this bald guy who had said he was a Miroku Buddhist in the Taoist temple, the shrines in Goji and Hinata, the church in Kushiyama, the Aiken Monastery, and now we saw him standing outside here. I didn't really notice, because we've never really talked but you see a face a few times and suddenly they're familiar. Wait... Visiting every temple, Miroku Buddhist... Wasn't there a girl waiting for this guy? She said he wanted to finish his pilgrimage before going back to his girl. But there wasn't anywhere else, so I told him, “She's still waiting for you. Go to her.” His face brightened. He went in quickly, and then headed out of town.

I took a look at the building. The temple of Sakun had a dome almost like a mosque, but the steps and pillars of a Zoroastrian temple, and some definite architectural traits of a synagogue. We stepped inside. Inside the temple were small statues to the lesser deities, but those attending ignored them in the same way a Catholic church tuned out the saints. Their focus was at the front of the temple at the burning flames of the candles and at the scrolls of laws, and each other. The temple's center was a large heated pool for ritual cleansing, the men and women stripped off their clothing and washed, then each put on ceremonial garments. The women put on special cloaks for the call to worship. They wore an outfit that extended just past their waist of mostly red vertical stripe with flowers and paisley interrupting the pattern, and they wore short pants that extended to their knee and were quite colorful. Rather than a tool for modesty, these outfits were basically only put on for temple activities for showing their holiness. When the ceremony ending they stripped, cleansed themselves again, and changed back into less formal outfits when they left. The men likewise cleansed themselves, and put on their outfits. They wore a turban with a diadem plate of gold that had a blue cord attached to it, a long white tunic covering from their chest to their ankles, a blue robe outside that that had fringes and tassels and bells, outside of this was a many-colored jacket called an *ephod*, and outside of that had a breastplate with twelve precious stones and two of onyx near the shoulder which were engraved with six names each. The men's garments were based on Jewish priestly robes, while the women's garment was based loosely around the Babr-e Bayān which was a mythical garment that acted as a protective talisman against harm of various types. The women completed their outfit with a *hamsa* necklace, a symbol with a hand with an eye in the center, symbolic of not only protection against the evil eye but it also protected the home and was a symbol of fertility.

I wasn't sure that normally outsiders would be let inside, but we had done them a big favor. In any case, they allowed us to attend the ceremony. They recited prayers in ancient Sumerian, so even I had trouble following everything. I know, it seems like I can speak every language, but it's mostly modern ones. Most of the service seemed to be various cleansing rituals though, and prayers honoring God, knowledge, and truth. After the service, we returned to the inn and spent the night there, before heading onward.

Back in the vast desert, Ambrosia said, “They seemed nice.” I shook my head, “During World War I, the Bavarians basically fought for show. When captured by the British, they'd even help with medical effort, hauling people away on stretchers. And the Saxons were basically not much different from the British, since they were part of the Anglo-Saxon racial group. But the Prussians were warlike almost from birth.” She looked confused, “What are you getting at?” I shook my head at actually having to explain such a simply concept, “In Mecca, at the time of Muhammad, there Jews, Zoroastrians, Christians, and even pagans all living in the same town. There was an unprecedented level of religious peace and tolerance. But fighting broke out for religious

dominance. As much as these religions could get along, some among them saw their religion as the only right one, and so strife came about that ran counter to the spirit of tolerance and harmony. They began to claim God told them to commit violence. Things are at peace now here, and maybe they'll keep it that way. But when things in history become too much a certain way, they become their antithesis." Ambrosia seemed sad, but she understood. Then she asked, "Does this mean also that when things get bad enough, the opposite happens?" Then I nodded, "The Buddha was born a prince when the rulers were warlords. Constant struggle was an everyday thing. Abraham was born at a time where law was unheard of, and warring tribes set the rules by might. And the Christ came into the world during the time of Roman authoritarians. History is not governed by the strong, but those who who have the courage to move the Earth back into love. Balance is something that happens, but the world is kept alive by great heroes, not great warriors. Even if no such hero comes though, corrupt dynasties eventually collapse under their own karmic weight or incur the wrath of their people. And if they kill their people, they eventually understand what it's like to rule a ghost town." Ambrosia still worried, "But what about when they try to replace their people with others? I mean, if your people were revolting, couldn't you just send in immigrants?" I chuckled, "Immigrants seldom have respect for the country's laws. Rather than fixing revolts, they instead risk becoming an invasion force willingly sent into the country. I don't need to tell you how stupid that is."

We left the town, and its fertile oasis behind, and the soft sandy soil gave way to sand and then finally to dry rocky ground interspersed with very hearty plants. It is said that the thorns of cactus are actually leaves, and it seemed as though everything in here decided that the way to survive the harsh climate was to turn into a more jagged version of themselves. The scraggly grasses that remained were sharp enough to cut our skin, and the soil barely was so dry that even those seemed a rarity. The extreme lack of humidity put the temperature during the day to about 50ºC to nearly 108ºC ,while at night it dropped below zero. The island of the Great Desert, in which Qurac was located in, had a very strange micro-climate. While the land near Goji and Seikai was just ordinary desert, the area near the oasis was fertile enough to farm and fish, and they did so, being careful not to deplete anything. Outside town, however the sand turned into a sort of ring of permadesert. It was difficult to enter or leave the town except during certain times of day, making this area isolated from the outside world in both directions. It looked like this ring hadn't had a major rain in over 400 years! We had less trouble crossing this area than most, thanks in part to our endurance training and Ambrosia's barrier against the environment, but the harsh plants and dry air was a real danger. Heading vaguely west from Qurac towards our ship, we made it trough soil as hard as stone or brick, around sword tussock-grass (a plant with high amounts of silica that was as sharp as glass), we avoided large salt flat lizards and lava lizards, and a watched certain variety of penguins with an oddly brown coat digging in the rough soil. Thyme and a plant called Yareta grew here despite virtually no moisture. The latter looked like a sort of green moss with rust-covered buds that waited in a sort of near-permanent state of dormancy until the rain finally came. When it did, the Yareta and many of the other flora would burst into bloom, making this area a flowering desert. But we couldn't really stick around for that. We had to leave this area before we dried up!

After some effort, we made it to the outskirts of that ring of almost complete desolation. The rocky soil switched back to sand. Oddly, there were actually less plants here than in the drier region, since the soil had no real hold. It was more pleasant temperature, but this was because a sandstorm steadily swept around the area. We were getting scratched up, and our lungs would probably fill up if this kept on. Thinking quickly, we pulled out our Party Tent from our backpack, and we all dove into it, zipping it after each of us. The inside of the tent was essentially a pocket dimension, so while sand blasted around the tent outside, the inside was a town green with grass and flowers. The sand storm appeared not to be dying down, so we went to the store and explained our situation. While most of the world had that corrupt system of money, our tent had people who were fine with Gold. Ambrosia paid 3000 Gold, and the rest of us chipped in 800, and the shopkeeper sold us ponchos and some goggles. Snapping our mouth guards on,

we ventured outside of the tent and collapsed it. We stumbled around blindly in the storm of dust and sand, but eventually we made it outside and toward the coast. We boarded our ship, and continued our journey.

CHAPTER 13

In which Lilith works on Mastering the Art of French cooking. By killing a dragon.

MICHAEL

I had become pregnant, and so I couldn't retain my form as a male. I didn't want to address embarrassing questions, so I bound my breasts, and I wore a bit longer of a toga than normal. Not that anyone noticed that. Although, Ambrosia did seem to notice that I wasn't quite as swift at dispatching bounties as I should have been. I couldn't really help that. While my child had no physical presence, she (and I knew it was wanting to be a she, even though there hadn't been female angels in millennia) took a large portion of my strength and speed, the aura I used to give me incredible powers. I wasn't confident flying, I couldn't use more than 30% of my protective aura so I felt extremes in heat and cold, and my physical traits were gone. My skin was even getting pimples! I had to use creams and makeup to make myself look normal. But whenever she "kicked," the pain would tear at my body. I wasn't well adapted to the female form as it is, and the angelic equivalent of pregnancy issues made my Script all out whack. For instance, I could say, "***Longboat - Duration: 1 Day***," and it would give me a long boat (an extra long canoe), which wasn't quite the same thing. Or it would screw with the duration, making things that should last a day suddenly fail. Or it would give antonyms of what I intended to create, punny versions, or even summon based on Google Translate versions of what I said. In other words, my lack of concentration made created distortions in my language similar to what a writer would wind up with if they felt tired, dehydrated, and a bit dizzy.

Some of these pregnancy symptoms I could cover up. I had frequently in previous battles refused to help the party, with the intention that it would help them develop better if they didn't depend on me. I could try to act like this, I suppose. But angels are bad at secrets. Sooner or later, it would show up on my face. Or I'd be forced into a situation where I'd have to use Scripts, and I'd say the wrong thing.

It got worse. Since my pregnancy itself was not physical, I also got to experience the symptoms of menstruation! And since the baby was developing first as an energy being, I had to stay out of sight during the light of a full moon, as my belly would glow.

AMBROSIA

I had not stalled *nearly* long enough. Improvising a little bit, I told everyone, "I think we should get Lilith a better knife, something she can use for cooking and for fighting, so she doesn't always have to use her claws." Lilith protested, "But I like ripping up stuff with my claws!" I shrugged, "But what if you run into something that is strong and needs to be dealt with using a strong weapon? Also, didn't you say that you wanted to be a cook?" Lilith changed her mind, "Okay, but I get to decide what it is. I want it to be metal." I nodded, "Okay, what kind of metal? Steel? Silver? Bronze? Durasteel? Titanium? Elven?" She shook her head, "No, like... Metal." Now I was confused. Aqorm clued me in, "She means like heavy metal. You've seen those badass fantasy genre things where they make swords out of weird stuff, just because it's awesome? She wants a unique sword." Ohhhhhh...

I drafted out several models. One involved waiting around for meteors to strike, then making the sword out of space metal. Another involved harnessing lightning. Lilith yawned. Around the fourth suggestion, she said, "Yeah, let's do that!"

That, it turned out, was fighting a freaking dragon and using its bones and blood to make a sword. And not just any dragon. The legendary black zombie dragon Fafnir. Flying to some obscure and probably even godforsaken place near Phoenix, we found the creature sitting there. It shambled towards us. In its day, Fafnir was a mighty dragon, but then it was slain by a powerful warrior who knew no fear. Later, a necromancer wanted a zombie dragon, but the process didn't really suit flight well, so now there was a dragon at least as powerful as Bahamut as a result of the dark energy poured into it, but it was

landlocked on this island.

The dragon was still very dangerous, even though it crawled along on all fours. From its back came a set of steam vents, and a strong acid gas burst out. When Yazim Jianne got close, his arm began to redden from the strong acid. “Everyone, get back!” Elias warned, “this caustic solvent is nothing to be messed with.” With the gas present, Aqorm and most of the humans couldn't fight at close range, so Elias used his prayers to hit it with Light, Azrael hit it with some solid spells and powerful effect symbols, and Zoe used his elemental magic to burn and freeze it. It was a tough critter, so all of that wasn't enough. Bahamut tried fighting it with her breath, but the other dragon roared and blasted black breath on her. She was not used to fighting other dragons, as powerful as she was, and now she had a group of people that she was responsible for transporting. She couldn't afford to put herself in danger, and so, with one last exhale of her prismatic breath, she flew off.

Her weapon did make an impact, however. The acid from before had dispersed, and the vaguely warm heat of her gentle breath was protecting us by preventing more from forming. And so I rushed in and used Alexander's Crest to blast it with a tornado of light. The dragon, far from being destroyed, looked healthier than ever. Suddenly, it stretched its wings and flew. “Congratulations,” Azrael said, “you managed to cleanse its undeath. Now it's a fully conscious legendary black dragon.” It flew off wreaking havoc in the nearby island, which happened to be Phoenix. The mountain town to the west of the castle, all was peaceful until we (and the dragon) came. Fafnir gobbled up livestock and then blasted at the shrine where Nevras's old girlfriend worked.

NEVRAS

Koren!

AMBROSIA

It wasn't pretty. Things hit with darkness attacks had a way of decaying. This building was covered in rust for the metal parts, the brick had instantly crumbled, and the girl inside looked withered. I could tell that she was the same young girl that had talked to Nevras and me awhile back. As we held her in our arms though, she looked about 120 years old. No, it hadn't actually aged her. More like she was withered as a flower might after the water had been drained from it. She lay on the ground, fully prepared to give her last words. Elias and Azrael set to work healing her condition, but it wasn't easy. I wasn't sure she would pull through. “***cough* *cough*** Nevras, so good to see you again,” she said, ignoring me, “I don't see that shameless hussy with you so I guess you've finally left her.” I stood off to the side, and right now she couldn't really turn her head or anything. “Nope, shameless hussy right here!” I called out. I was surprised though. Last we met of her, she seemed supportive of us. Maybe in her last moments, jealousy was getting the better of her? I didn't like her like this, it was ugly. “Look, I'm sorry I took your old boyfriend, but,” I told her watching her withered face wrinkled in annoyance with me, “wait no, I'm not sorry, I wouldn't have him in the first place if you had really made him happy. If anything, I'm grateful to you.” Elias and Azrael continued work on her, and her face was beginning to restore. She thought about what I told her, and as much as she seemed to want to be angry or jealous, she finally let out a long sigh, and her face relaxed. “I suppose you're right,” she said, “he was never really mine to begin with, or he wouldn't have left this town for other things. For you. You can care for him, as I cannot.” She sat up. The two healers had wiped away the darkness, and her face looked its true age again. The side effect of so much magic inside of her right now was that her hair turned white, but that would go away in about a week or two.

“Actually, about that, I have something to confess,” I told her, walking away from the battle lines. Bahamut was breathing blast after blast of iridescent fire at Fafnir, Nevras was using his sword techniques, and the others were casting spells or prayers, so it was only a matter of time before the giant dragon fell to the ground. I had something more important to talk about, and it had to be done out of earshot from the others. We walked up a mountain path to an overlook. “Surely, you're not planning to push me from here,” Koren said. I quickly shook my head. “No,” I responded, “definitely not. I'm actually having troubles here.” And I recounted our journey, how we had actually made it to the

battle with Belial and the whole time travel thing, but before that, Nevras had left the group. “That does sound like Nevras,” she said. Noting my shocked face, she clarified, “Listen, Nevras didn't bail on me, and he didn't walk out on you. I know it looks that way, but I'm pretty sure right after he left, he regretted it and came back. And I'm pretty sure he was waiting on the other side of that portal if you all hadn't gotten killed off.” “How do you know?” I asked. She explained, “Nevras has had pretty impossible expectations growing up. I got to know him as he was a boy. I played dress-up with him, and we climbed trees together. He wanted to be a girl sometimes...” I smirked, “You noticed that too, huh?” She nodded and continued, “But more importantly, he wanted to just be an ordinary villager. He wanted to shop and earn a living honestly, never to run other people's lives.” The dragon blasted a barn below us, turning it to dust. “So, why did he leave me?” I asked. Our group retaliated with a volley of spells. She explained, “As I say, he didn't leave either of us. He left the town of Phoenix, after he chose to become a soldier rather than be king. He left before they married him off, and decided to fight creatures instead. And based on what I know of him, he left before the Void , because he wasn't clear on your feelings and his own feelings. If you two were really into each other, he'd be fine with that, you have a future together. But what do you think happens if you're just friends?” Apparently, it was a rhetorical question, because she answered, “You defeat the demon, and he goes back a hero, along with the others. But then, as a hero, he'd more than anything be expected to fulfill his duty alone as crown heir. So you see, he didn't leave you. He's been running from this life, and his feelings all along. Show him you care, and I know the rest will work out.” I nodded.

“So what happened after your time reset?” Koren asked. I told her about my plans to stall for more time with him, even at the expense of Belial possibly destroying everything. She frowned, “I can understand this. But I'm worried you'll break his heart, if he finds out.” From the overlook, we saw Fafnir fall from the sky, and Nevras and Lilith slash at it. This battle would be over soon. “I know that,” I admitted, “but I want to spend as much time making him happy. Even if it takes an eternity.” The wind blew, and from this height it was kinda cold. We should get back. “I should really push you off this cliff,” I said. She smiled, “But you won't.” I struggled with the idea, of having Nevras to myself. But nahhh. Pretty sure the guy wouldn't like his childhood crush being offed by his current interest. Instead, I hugged her, “You're a good friend.” She surprised me by kissing me on the lips, “And I love you for loving him for me. Take care of him.”

I was later to learn that Koren would get married to the owner of an inn nearby, who helped rebuild her shrine. She kinda swung both ways, so it wasn't that shocking that the owner was a girl. But they had to elope, since many towns didn't do gay marriage. It was really up to the priest, and a priest couldn't always do it publicly if the town had laws against it. But they seemed happy.

We held hands going down the mountain, as we had a better understanding of our man, and each other. Fafnir had many bruises and cuts, but Lilith was determined to make the final blow. Before she could though, I used Aiken's Crest to walk through Fafnir's body, grabbed its heart and pulled it out, stealing the kill from her. Lilith was understandably pissed, but I set to work helping everyone prepare the dragon. I gave the still-beating dragon heart to her, which she promptly ate. The heart of a dragon stores its blood, while its soul escapes on death. Its blood tends to have properties of its element. In a black dragon, the “black blood” tends to wither and decay most of those who consume it. But demons are made of sterner stuff, so its second effect came into action. While she screamed in agony from the pain, her skin turned a grayer shade. To test he body's changes, she lobbed a boulder in the air and let it hit her. The old her could shrug off bullets, but would still be hurt by something like this. But here, when her skin broke, black blood oozed out and formed a coating harder than steel. The boulder broke, and her demonic body quickly scabbed and healed up. Nevras tested his sword on her, which being a sword made from light, should have badly hurt her. But again, areas where he slashed oozed this blood, that seemed to harden and reflect blows. The holy energy surrounding the weapon did seem to have some effect, causing tiny high-pitched noises as the blood apparently “screamed” from this type of energy. I doubted it could hold up to prolonged strikes of holy energy, but for basically any physical attack, it was basically

like armor. She cut her arm with her sharp claws, just to see. She had two types of blood now, her real blood, and the protective black blood, which she could use to defend herself. She could still be hurt as normal, but her blood prevented attacks from penetrating her organs.

But this wasn't all. We pulled away the scales of Fafnir, and made a dragonscale bikini for her, selling the rest of the dragon's scales to the local merchants for making professional armors. And then we had the bones. These would make a nice weapon. Through this whole battle, even falling through the sky, they showed no sign of chipping, cracking or breaking. The trouble was, how to use this? Anything this indestructible would be difficult or impossible to carve into a weapon. The others were likewise confused, so they worked on the problem for some time, until seeing the armorers who couldn't penetrate the scales nonetheless rearrange them into armor. Seeing this, I suggested maybe we try to transmute the bones, changing their general shape into that of a sword, while keeping the toughness of the bones. Yazim Jianne and Elias worked on this project for quite some time, and soon Lilith had a white bone sword. But it wasn't done yet. Using the sword, she cut herself and her own blood mixed with the black blood, turning the blade section of the sword jet black and giving a hard outer layer. The sword had also bonded to her as a result of her own blood. Not only was it durable and very sharp, but she could call it to her by willing it forth. With a quick slice, she split Christina, her pet rock, in half. We held a memorial, as she mourned her dear friend for all these years. “I'm a murderer,” she sobbed, when she was just testing out her sword on a rock. No matter. She had real friends now.

As for the rest of the dragon, the regions around Phoenix didn't want the dragon's evil aura to persist, so they made a ceremony of burying it at sea with a Viking funeral. Unfortunately, normal flames couldn't burn the bones, and the black blood from the carcass wound up in the sea. This was the same region, by the way, that they dumped off intelligent bacteria which could use runes, and in the days to come, the two would eventually combine to form Dark Life. Phoenix was a town which resisted the sick monetary system that many other cities adopted, but they did have to answer for this. Heaven knows we weren't responsible for any of this.

But let's forget about that for the time being. Lilith tested out her sword, which was pretty much just a long knife for cutting meat or veggies, or the bodies of huge creatures in battle. Tonight, she worked on chopping some of the meat from our ship. We had boar meat from awhile back that had been preserved, so she sliced it into thin strips. Making a fire in her hand with the power given to all demons, she started to cook up this wild pork, cutting it into thinner and thinner pieces, until at last she made a truly heroic-looking sandwich, with onions and peppers. She called it the “hero sandwich” since it was only after we had gone on a heroic quest to obtain such an incredible weapon that she was able to make this dish.

NEVRAS

Since Koren was safe and the dragon was defeated, and we didn't foresee the eventual rise of Dark Life that we were sorta kinda remotely responsible for, and anyway this didn't come about until about four years after our mission with Belial was over, I decided to throw a royal ball, in honor of Not Getting Destroyed By A Giant Freaking Dragon. What, you expected there to be an official reason like the 15th Anniversary of Coronation? No, we tried stuff like that in our early history, back when taxes were still a thing. People kinda revolted. Now, we pay for it out of pocket, and only hold one when something major happens. I assume this counted. I invited Koren, Kurasawa my old swordmaster, Admiral Blackfang, villagers down to the shopkeeper Alyndria (who we shall never mention again, even though she managed to scrounge up an awesome red sequin dress), and many of our royal guards to the event. Against my best wishes, I wound up in a tuxedo. Ambrosia was dressed in a sheer brown dress, much like her normal outfit, except floor length and without the apron, and made of chiffon instead of cotton. Most of the others simply wore frillier or fancier versions of their own outfits. For example, Yazim Jianne wore formal robes instead his typical ones. I'd like to say that everyone looked completely stunning but the truth was, many of us had to budget costs.

Despite having claimed 75 Million Gold as a bounty, we wound up paying 50 Million back to him to apologize for the whole blackmail thing.

Ambrosia wanted to see what 5 Million Gold looked like, so I pulled some out of the bank. I'm sure some people would imagine a briefcase filled with coins of Gold, but it isn't like that. Money has denominations, after all. The lowest denomination of currency is a Copper, then Silver, followed by Gold. And after that, you occasionally see (among the rich, anyway) coins of 10 Gold, 100 Gold, Copper Egg (1k), Silver Egg (10k), Jewel Egg (100k), and finally the Million Gold egg (it was reduced in weight). Ambrosia was shocked to see that 5 Million Gold just looked like five golden eggs, but quickly amused herself by juggling them. She sucked, but thankfully the yoke wasn't on her, she just got some bruises from objects landing on her.

As for the house we were promised, we wound up with a receipt from King Charis. He said something about it being a poor time to build houses, on account of having to repair half of the city, and how we'd feel better if we knew we could have a house during our worst times. So he put a raincheck on the house, to be built later. Lastly, we asked for a weapon as promised. Instead, he gave me a key to the catacombs, saying they'd hidden it there. So when all was said and done, we had to save most of our bounty money on the off-chance that my dad wouldn't follow through on his promise. We basically got discount prom dresses (and by discount, I mean free from the royal storage) instead of something fit for a royal ball. Nobody seemed that concerned though, since the villagers and the guards weren't much better off. In fact, only Selqui was much of a change from their normal outfit, and this was because Selqui didn't even have any outfits normally, and was definitely not going in just underwear. Lilith had showed Selqui how to dress, since Lilith did know how to put together a sexy outfit, though she just normally preferred to go around in underwear too. With Aqorm's occasional nudism we had three members of our group severely lacking in modesty and decorum, but it wasn't so here. Selqui was wearing makeup, had on a sea-colored dress made from silk, and her brown hair was pinned in bun using a fork. Don't ask me why, I don't get it. She quickly chucked her heels, so she wound up looking shorter than most of the other women.

The music started playing, and many of us picked our partners. I grabbed Ambrosia. Yazim Jianne and Selqui clasped hands. Aqorm decided to dance with Elias while Lilith paired with Michael. Not that an angel and demon dancing together didn't get odd looks.

As enlightened as society was, interspecies romances were sometimes frowned upon. Marriages to angels, djinn, or demons often carried the same stigma as marrying a pet, while others thought that sex with a demon might corrupt your soul, and still others believed that it was impossible for demons to be faithful. As for marrying angels, there were plenty of people who blamed Noah's Ark and the worldwide flooding that followed on such unions. Among royalty however, they had a long list of things that were “simply not done” and they said as much in snobby upper-class accents. They weren't too keen on two women dancing either, though they couldn't give any reasons.

Thankfully for mousy intellectual Azrael, a brash woman like Zoe simply shrugged off what those people thought, and kept dancing. Not that they were any good at it, as Zoe routinely stomped on Azrael's toes or wobbled in her heels, threatening to trip and send both of them sprawling to the floor. Azrael on the other hand was far more poised in her dancing, and it was through her help that the two didn't in fact make a scene. Well, more than one. While spinning around, they crashed into another couple, who sneered at them, but Zoe stuck out her tongue at them.

Michael and Lilith's dance was similarly awkward, as it felt like Elias and Aqorm, Aqorm and Lilith, and Lilith and Michael were all holding some kind of secret. And it felt like Lilith had the most issues right now. If I had to guess, I might think there was some sort of romantic polygon going on right now. Probably a rhombus or trapezoid. In any case, Lilith finally shrugged it off and stopped looking longingly at Aqorm, instead focusing on her current partner. And then awkwardness of a different sort prevailed. You see, angels view dance as an expression higher spiritual principles, that is to spread joy and happiness among others. Demons on the other hand, view dance as a vertical version of a horizontal action. So while one partner was all joy and light, the other was practically wanting sex on the dance floor.

Elias and Aqorm were slow dancing much like two friends that had decided to go to the prom together, after their first choice wasn't an option. Elias's first choice was probably books, and judging Aqorm's eyes locking with Lilith, I was pretty sure I could tell her choice too. They spend some of their time talking, and while they seemed friendly enough, after a few songs Elias waved for her to go ahead, while heading to the refreshment table. "May I cut in?" she said to Michael, grabbing Lilith's hand. Michael looked at the two of them for a second, before heading to *other* refreshment table.

The two of us were having fairly low drama compared to them. Ambrosia's eyes were on me, and I could see her feelings for me. But I couldn't help getting the sense that she was making up for lost time. I mean, for quite awhile, she was all about her quest, and barely had any time to talk to me. Then all of a sudden, she stalled her quest for "training" as she put it. She looked at me. And I looked at her. And we looked at each other for a long period. And then we both blushed, and looked over somewhere else.

In the royal ballroom, there stood two tables, one for food and one for wine. Elias, being a scholar and having misgivings about killing his brain cells, largely avoided getting seriously drunk. On the other hand, Michael could get drunk on a thimbleful of alcohol even if his body would flush toxins out when they got near a fatal dosage. But then, he seemed to want to wipe this night from his memory. You can trust that since this table was stocked by the royal family, it had everything from mead and brandy, to various fruit wines, to drow liquor (a strong wine-like brew which involved sugar, mushrooms, various chemical starters for fermentation, and even some salt), absinthe, and strange brews that seemed to have lizards in the alcohol or baby mice. Then there was one drink called Centzon Totochtin, which I noticed when helping stock for the ball that it read «400 Proof.» The secret to its abnormally high proof was that the alcohol was condensed down to thick droplets using a process called supersaturation. It was needless to say that this brew was expensive to make, and you had to be a certain age, weight, and race to even be allowed to drink it. Michael barely sniffed some and fell unconscious, awakening only after the rest of the party was over.

At the food table, Elias had better luck. The hors d'oeuvres were personally prepared by our royal chefs, and some of them were imported at great expense (tariffs being what they are) from overseas. Crab rangoon and crab puffs, angels on horseback, blooming onion, chicken or oyster fritters, buffalo wings, fried mushrooms, onion rings, and jalapeno poppers were all native dishes to Phoenix. We had a strong fried food culture. The imported foods were *baozi*, samosa, bruschetta, gravlax, caviar, and something called *tokwa't baboy* (a mix of tofu and pig parts dipped in a mixture of soy sauce, pork broth, vinegar, chopped white onions, scallions, and red chili peppers). They also had several dim sum dishes, mixed sushi, and assorted *kimchi*. After a few dances, Ambrosia and I joined him, and asked about what was going on with his relationship with Aqorm. He blurted out my exact suspicion that Elias had given away Aqorm to Lilith because he thought she could love her better, and mentioned in passing that Aqorm was sorta pregnant. Kinda. "But don't tell her that I told you," he made us promise. We promised not to mention this, and I decided not to mention to Ambrosia that I thought Michael might also be involved with Lilith. I don't think she could take all of this. In fact, I'm not sure how well she Ambrosia remembered what she had just been told, because she made it over to the bar herself.

While we pigging out on food that was delicious but of dubious nutritional value, Yazim Jianne and Selqui were dancing the night away. While the others enjoyed dancing to be with each other and for the fun of dancing, these two had decided to sabotage other dancers. Selqui materialized her trident and used the back end of it to trip a few dancers. Yazim Jianne spread some thick viscous substance near some others, and watched them suddenly stop dancing. It was probably time to leave.

CHAPTER 14

In which an ancient elf town is discovered. The town, it's not full of old elves.

AQORM

I was pregnant, and about to deliver. Unlike human pregnancies, elves have bodies that are designed physically and spiritually exceptional. That's right we're better than all of you, even me, a lowly half-elf. I wasn't very sure how a demon mix would affect me pregnancy, but so far, it seemed to be turning out normal.

An elf delivered after only three months, so there was virtually no baby bump, and their children started out tiny, but grew outside the body. With all that had happened, that time passed very fast, and before I knew it, between training and sidequests, and just pointless nonsense, I was about ready to deliver. The elf's umbilical cord was designed to quickly detach when exposed to the air, and the first thing they would do is to eat the placenta. These early nutrients were key to strong development as a proud member of the elf race, with purebreds and immortal (demonic or angelic mainly) half-breeds living forever; however, in order for that to happen, an elf typically had to be delivered by other elves. The reason long-lived elves did not overrun the New Earth was because elves and half-elves had to be mature (which took over 1000 years) in order to give birth, and they tended to have high infant mortality if delivered by humans with their germs. And so, I would need to visit my grandparents in Ru'un, my homeland. Elias, Lilith, and I made up some pretext as to why we had to leave, and hopped on Bahamut.

Bahamut grumbled a bit from all the riding we'd been doing. Well, when it took days or weeks of travel one way, and only a few hours another way, the only reason we used our ship now was when we had to haul supplies, or we just needed downtime. Bahamut flew so fast that it was difficult to even have a conversation, much less rest. Occasionally, Bahamut would borrow a human form for a boat ride, just so she could actually chill out for awhile and find out what was going on with us. Apparently, being a dragon did tend to get lonely, which is why so many of them had gold or other stuff to keep them company. She seemed somewhat happy to haul us around.

It seemed like at least some of the others knew or suspected our plight, but didn't seem to mind. Others, like Yazim Jianne, were so incredibly dense about human relationships that they probably wouldn't realize I was gone. As I left, I saw them whip out a card game of some sort. I would likely let my kin raise the child until our quest was done. I wasn't sure after our journey either, since I wasn't confident in Lilith's ability to be a good “father.” Irregardless, we were leaving, and not going to tell anyone else why we were going. Elias quickly told me “irregardless” should not be a word.

We landed just outside Zuran. The town of Ru'un was located in the Hidden Forest, by a secret path. We walked through the confusing forest yet again, but this time instead of going to the mountain where we fought Sera and Phim, we turned towards the forest maze where we recently fought the Skinny Minotaur. The natural maze of brush and undergrowth made us walk slowly through a pretty small area, but eventually we made our way out of the maze after moving left and right through a lot of twists and turns. But then another difficulty awaited us. A thick fog covered the area, and we were forced to stumble ahead cautiously. I had heard that misty areas like this were often where bogs formed, and from what I knew of bogs, they were way worse than quicksand. The bog would look like regular dirt or grass but layers upon layers of peat moss, vines, dead animals, and water created a sort of death trap where falling in would suck you to the bottom. Not wanting to step somewhere I shouldn't, I used my geomancy to form thick vines to cross. Soon enough, I had a natural bridge.

The journey was made all the more arduous by the fact that I had become pregnant. The effects of pregnancy were a lot more mild on elves than other critters, but we elves deliver much faster, and it was almost my time. In had to make it to my family home of Ru'un within the week, and from the way my stomach felt, maybe even by nightfall. I hoped not. I plodded ahead carefully in the misty forested region, yet also with a sense of urgency, never knowing if I would be too late.

ELIAS

I shall explain about the effects of the use of mystic power. I know this doesn't seem relevant, but it is key to understanding why pure-blooded elves live so long and why Aqorm felt she had to make this trip, despite all risks.

As readers of this account may know, all creature with mystic power have an internal rune ley system known as *dantian*, with specific points called pressure points. Such points can be damaged or broken or exhausted, greatly hindering mystic power. They can even be poisoned (this is known as taint). Likewise, the Earth has ley points and ley lines, and circulates energy through rocks, trees, the land, the air, and the water. This energy is known as *senju*, and humans typically have no ability to draw it directly, unless they are a Sage or have some abnormality in the way they use magic.

Among immortal creatures, the only effect of mystic power usage is fatigue and/or exhaustion from usage. After resting, mystic power would be restored with no ill effects. But it was different for mortals. This is because on the way our ley system works.

Now what most people may not know is that *dantian* is actually divided into three portions (lower, middle, and upper). There is the upper portion, located mainly in the pineal gland or third eye, known as the “muddy pallet” and is related to consciousness. Alone, the upper dantian is the source of *wu wei* understanding, but combined with the middle portion, the person was able to use magic. The middle portion was known as the “crimson palace” and was centered around the heart and it was its job to turn vitality into spirit (mystic power), while the lower was known as the “golden stove” and was centered near the stomach and its job was to purify all things in order to generate vitality. But therein lies the problem.

You see, many humans have a flawed circulation of *dantian* and tend to use only the upper and middle *dantian*, meaning mystic power in a human is eventually generated from their lifespan while vitality slowly drained, and the heart tried to restore the mystic power itself. This is not shared with the public for fear of panic. However, things are not completely hopeless. Mystic power can be retrained to generate vitality from the lower *dantian* or to draw instead from *senju*. This is called cultivation, and it brings the human body more in rhythm with how immortals use magic. If cultivation is practiced, this effectively slows aging and actually increases lifespan.

Many immortals never actually use mystic power at all but rather they redirect it, others have correct *dantian*, and still others don't have a *dantian* at all but a different system (as in the case of Nephilim). These systems all work effectively to protect from the decay of time. However, half-elves typically cannot last forever, though they do live a long life. This is because their bodies as a result of being mixed race, had an incomplete connection with any specific ecosystem.

Being a half-elf wasn't a kiss of death in terms of their immortality though. But in order for an elf to grow up strong and healthy enough to develop immortality in late adolescence, an elf needed an infancy free of human diseases. They needed to be delivered and raised by a real elf.

AQORM

After wandering through the forest, we encountered the town of Ru'un. The town was basically entirely tree-houses. No, I don't mean those crappy things you humans call tree-houses, just a bunch of wood cut around a decapitated tree. Elves had long since discovered magic on their own, different from the petty runes that the humans used. Aside from geomancy abilities, elves had other powers based on their skills and personality (as a half-elf, I had never been able to use these, and my geomancy was far more limited than a true elf). For example, Shapers of rocks or trees or snow could communicate with spirits residing in living and nonliving nature, convincing them to reform matter in their favor. And so, the trees in this area tended to grow with hollows in exchange for water and fertilizer. Thanks to care elf Nurturers, these trees were well-watered and fed, and even maples and cherries turn grew as tall and wide as redwoods. The elf Illusionists kept the Hidden Forest hidden with a number of tricks, such as the thick mist near the maze, hiding the entrance from people who weren't intending to find the town, and so on. Most humans didn’t even know that the town existed.

Ru'un had such houses adorned with all sorts of furniture, and the hyphae from mushroom symbiotes formed “windows” capable of seeing outside without disturbing the structure of the trees. By only pruning excess growth, the elves made tables and chairs for their houses while still keeping the forest in good health. The houses themselves were lit

by species of fireflies. And they kept a great variety of these, from the yellow glow *Photinus* fireflies, to the creepy blue glow *Phausis* ones, to the deep green light of the *Photuris* variety. Some of these were just left to be crawling around houses (which creeped me out) while other elves kept them in jars and fed them all the snails and earthworms they wanted. Their houses had all of the conveniences you'd expect from houses in the major city, like running water, heating/cooling, and it produced all of these through their relationships with plants and animals. A deep river ran through through the town so a fair amount of fish, kelp, and aquatic elves living in the depths.

I was struck by how young these elves seemed. As I aged slowly, I still looked older, but all of these elves looked like they were in late teenage years, and I saw none of them with even a hint of wrinkles. More so than that, they seemed to have no cares at all. There were no prisons and no union workhouses, rather these elves seemed to figure out what they wanted to do for the day then they did it. I saw many pick berries, and others were painting with natural materials, and still others sang for food. From what I saw, they had little concept of money, and those that did probably lived and traded with humans. They were dressed in garments spun from flowers and leaves. Their hair was long and hung loosely past their shoulders with some braiding it or adorning it with this same greenery. While none of them looked like they had done more than soak in the river, their hair was as nice as if they had washed it with beauty products.

The elves meandered around, only vaguely interested in the fact that outsiders had come. When they were violent, the elves as a race were far better at both physical attacks and magic. When they were peaceful, I won't be the first to say that my race was arrogant, and didn't believe anything was gained from others. There was nothing they needed, so trade was out too, and they had little to talk about with humans who would be here one day and gone the next. They did vaguely notice me, but the looks on their face were filled with pity. I was a lowly half-elf, after all, doomed with even my lifespan to die quickly to their eyes. All looked down on me and refused to talk, until I met an elf with pink hair who kind of looked like me. “Aqorm!” she cried, “Is that you?” Having never met any relatives, I had no idea who this was.

Seeing the confused look on my face, she explained, “Why, I'm your grandmother! Goodness, did your parents never mention me?” I had known from my parents that my grandparents were in fact elves, and I knew from seeing my folks that full-blooded elf puberty was arrested at about the point where they looked 14, while I continued to age, although about 1/100 of what I should look for my age. I was full-formed as an adult, while they were a good 6 inches below me. Of course, since my parents didn't want to look younger than me, they used makeup, height prosthesis, and in some cases Glamours to appear older than me and taller than they were. They obviously knew that I knew this, but they wanted me to be at ease and not see myself as older than my folks. Of course, I had an extra finger on each hand as well, if I didn't have enough reminders of how different I was from my parents. But as long as I had known them, getting used to how they looked older than me just made it all the more shocking when I saw elves in their natural state. I stood next to her, as if to point out the difference to the others. But they only commented on how much I looked like my grandma.

Siofra Athanasius was a powerful wood elf Healer, as I later discovered. I explained, “I'm kinda pregnant, and ummm...” She nodded, “Say no more! Your parents didn't want to have a child delivered here, so they ran off. A shame too! Your bloodline is so messed up. Any decent Healer could fix this immediately.” I was kinda miffed at basically being called a mutt, but she'd said something about fixing it. “You can do that?” I asked her. Siofra nodded, “Yes, I can. Would you want it? I won't change anyone's body who doesn't. That would be unethical!” I imagined her trying to transform me as I slept.

I thought about it for quite awhile. It dawned on me exactly why my parents didn't have me healed. Even though mixed breeds tended to be half-elves, I could have been made immortal like my parents. But, this life living in a mansion and sitting and reading books wasn't actually all that satisfying, and deep down they must have known that while they enjoyed it, I might not. But, I realized, I didn't have to follow in their footsteps. I could be my own person. I nodded. I had a choice to make.

“But... could I do this before the pregnancy is done?” She shook her head. “Your

body is 5'8". Reshaping your body to that of an elf changes your spiritual nature, and it changes your physique. The baby inside you would likely be crushed. Let's wait until you deliver first." Then I had a thought, "What about my fifth finger? I'm a pianist." She nodded, "I doesn't have to go unless you want it to. Oh yeah, and you'll probably play faster. Elves tend to be four-fingered, but it's not an indicator of immortality. The other things are, like your spiritual energy flow and your immune system. "

I considered it some more. If I were to look like all of the other elves, they probably wouldn't laugh at me or call me names, and I'd probably be able to join in. However, I wasn't sure I'd be able to get used to playing without all my fingers. I asked my grandma whether she'd think less of me if I kept them, but she didn't seem to care. Then I asked the other townspeople, and they didn't seem to care for an entirely different reason. Finally, I just grabbed a coin and flipped. Heads, I go ahead with it and get rid of the extra finger; tails, I keep it. It came up heads. I rolled again for two out of three, but it kept coming up heads. Darn, I guess fate wanted me to remove the thing. But I suddenly realized I wasn't gonna let a coin decide. I would decide my own fate.

And I decided to get rid of it anyway. My extra fingers, not the child. I didn't have to think of that now though. The baby was coming. Right now. It started with my water breaking. Elves were a lot less messy than humans so it wasn't as obvious, but I felt slightly wet and like something was struggling to come out of me, and told her, "I think maybe the baby's coming." We were still outside, so she called over a Shaper to create a medical table in the woods. She sat me on the table and told me to lie down.

I spread my legs. There was no business about pushing, none of your human customs. She instead placed her hands on my belly, and began to channel natural energy in. The baby shifted position. I was delivered by humans, so no energy was sent to align my body with elf standards of immortality. My parents had the whole groaning and pushing and loads of pain, from what I understood of those pregnancies. My pregnancy on the other hand, was relatively calm. I felt it crawling around inside of me. She switched mostly to me, healing and numbing pain, as the child inched out of my crotch. I saw its head, then its neck, then the shoulders (and at this point, she had to heal and numb quite a bit since slowly crawling out widened me up quite bit and felt like it was tearing flesh. Then I realized she actually was tearing flesh, as she had pretty decent-sized claws. I was bleeding a lot, and Siofra wanted to be sure it wasn't any internal wounds because I did look kinda weak. She put me to sleep for awhile.

"Hey, all better. Wanna hold her?" she asked. I opened my eyes, and sat up. Lilith was holding my baby nearby while Siofra talked to me. I looked at the child, a blond girl with obvious elf ears, light skin like mine, pretty red eyes that glowed when she was upset, and some fully-developed sharp teeth. She had creepy parts to her, and I kinda suspected that one day she might become an evil creature, but for now she was adorable. And she was crying for her mother's milk. "Hand her over," I said, reaching my hands forward. And then, I noticed several things at once. First, the sunlight was in a different spot, so several hours must have passed. Second, when I had sat up, my body felt different, almost like I had somehow been slouching because everything felt taller than before. And then, as I reached forward, I noticed it. "Aaaahhh~!" I screamed. My hands were different. Aside from a missing finger on each hand, my body was shorter and leaner. When I got back, I would learn how to move this body. I'd need to learn how to fight, how to run, and whether this body could still breathe water and stuff. But for now, my baby was crying. Lilith handed her over, giving her a slight kiss first. The fight went out of her, and she suddenly stopped crying. "Huh," I asked, "what happened?" Lilith smiled, "Oh that? You know how supposedly if a child doesn't get any real love in the first ten years or so, they say the child becomes a psycho or something?" I had never actually heard this, and was inclined to believe that maybe she made it up. She saw my look of incredulity, and insisted that she had read this in the *National Enquirer*. The paper had actually become more serious as time went on, while other papers eventually became fake news, but every so often they said things that couldn't be verified. I shrugged, "What about it?" She continued to explain, "Well, demons have a shorter threshold, turning violent if not given love in the first 10 hours of their life. Even though we have a journey to complete, we can't just leave her with her grandmother. We have to

show her that we love her."

Elias told us about some study around 1944 AD where about 40 infants were given food and water but no affection. The children were not hugged or kissed, just treated like experiments. Apparently, they died and no cause for it could be found. They just stopped crying, and then they gave up. Even some they took away to normal houses gave up. I wasn't sure that story was true, even though he insisted it was a real study. The point was, we needed someone to give her some cuddling, but we didn't want her getting hurt.

I asked her, "But what can we do? I can't exactly keep her in a bubble while violent beasts attack us." I set the little girl down. Although being an infant, she immediately started crawling, and with her sharp claws, she began climbing the surface of a tree. "Sastraneth," I said, quickly giving her a good demon name, "come down from there!"

My choice of words could have been better. She jumped towards me, barely missing my hands. She was gonna hurt herself! I panicked and raised my hands protectively. Rather than hearing the expected dull thud of my child hurting herself though, I heard a sound closer to a tennis ball bouncing off the ground. I opened my eyes. My baby was inside a blue-green bubble, and giggling as if nothing had happened. "What... what is that?!?" I asked my grandmother. Siofra explained, "High elves can use real magic by redirecting nature. Drow can use dark magic by draining from the bodies of others. All other elves can use geomancy. But one thing we have in common is our gifts. Some of us are Shapers, some Healers, some are Firebringers, some Nurturers. You are a Protector, your gift is to be able to protect those you love dearly. Though it will only be big enough to protect your child at first, it is quite strong, and it responds to your will. Think about Sastra being carried on your back." I did, and the bubble floated towards me until it attached to my back, making it easy to haul Sastraneth around. She continued, "As an elf, you will find you can do lots of things you couldn't before. For instance..." And she used geomancy more frequently than once a day, creating vines here, there, and everywhere. The other elves looked peeved at her, but quickly chopped the excess vegetation with their swords. "Well," Lilith noted, "I think you'll be able to take your daughter with you if you want." But I couldn't risk her getting hurt by accident, so I thanked her and refused. Surely my child would be fine being raised by surrogates.

Bidding our farewells, we left Sastra with my grandma. Despite the fact that I could now keep her safe, I worried about dying on this quest and making her an orphan. I wasn't sure that I could do that to her, and Siofra was young and healthy enough to care for her. I would try to visit as much as possible in the time to come.

ELIAS

I wanted to talk to Aqorm during our time at the elf village, but things had become very awkward. It wasn't just shyness, though I had no shortage of that. It was the sense that I was a third wheel, that our conversations in the past didn't matter because the real one that she loved was the baby's "father." There were cultures in the past that had polygamy, Judaism neither condemned nor supported it (accepting it somewhat but eventually some rabbis ruled against it), and many pagan cultures at least practiced polygamy. These days, the Council banned it for those living in countries under its system (Hell was not one of them) for a variety of reasons:

1. To prevent people from taking advantage of their wives
2. To avoid potential infighting between rival wives, and prevent murder.
3. That the husband be unable to provide properly for all his wives. Or vice versa.
4. That a man may marry wives in different locations, which may lead to incest.
5. There were other minor reasons, like a concern that polygamy was not ideal.

When I looked at my own experiences, despite the Council now being gone, and with it the world in a messy state, I suddenly understood these concerns. It seemed like years ago when Aqorm and I joked about old historical wars or talked about random topics. *Ménage à trois* definitely sounded better in French than it felt in reality. Today, despite me clearly telling Aqorm that while I loved her, and wanted the best for her, and this is why being a scholar I couldn't marry her and give her a family because I wasn't confident that I wouldn't neglect the child, I couldn't help feeling like she had left me for Lilith.

As we flew atop Bahamut back to the others, Aqorm watched my face. "Ummm, it's

just me, but you're upset about something," she said. I sighed, "I just felt like, with you and Lilith, I wasn't needed anymore. I'm just thinking perhaps I should leave the both of you alone." Aqorm looked at Lilith, and the other looked back, and they both shook their heads at me. Lilith told me, "I actually like you as the third part of our relationship. If something happens to either of us, I want you to be the godfather of our kid. Well, aside from Siofra, which is why Sastraneth is back there. I just can't see fighting a giant demon while holding a child being good parenting." Aqorm nodded and consoled me, "Elias, you will always be my love. I love you and Lilith in different ways. You don't have to feel secondary to her. You're the one I come to when there's something I need to talk about." I felt better about the whole thing, but Lilith seemed worse.

Lilith sighed and lowered her head, "I have something to confess. I've slept with Michael, and Michael is ummm pregnant." It was my turn to sigh. Since my relationship with Aqorm was of one who admired her but didn't have a physical relationship, I felt sympathy for her, as I watched her close up emotionally. Lilith as well seemed to be deeply sorry for what she had done, and unable to keep from sobbing, which was a peculiar sight for a demon.

Against my better judgement when their relationship was already built on messing around, I made a decision. "Do you wish to elope?" I asked them. They seemed shocked. "But I just said..." said Lilith, "I mean, I'd already gotten Michael pregnant before I even slept with Aqorm. And I'm not sure I'm ready to get married. I don't even have a dress!" She pointed to her conspicuous lack of dress, and in fact that she was dressed in her chainmail bikini. I brushed aside her concerns, "I don't think anyone cares about what you've done. It's important what you'll do. This child needs a mother and father." Aqorm queried, "Mother and father? We're both women!" I elaborated, "I'm talking about **roles** in marriage. A mother nurtures, looks after the home, and both teach the children. A father defends the children from harm and earns money to create a stable place to live. If both are working full-time, the children suffer from lack of skills and values. If both are at home, financial struggles are a fact of life. Out of concern for the child, will you be a family for them?" They nodded.

"Okay then," I said while still on Bahamut's back, "Ummmm, Dearly Beloved, we have come together in the presence of God to witness and bless the joining together of this woman and this woman in Holy Matrimony. The the union of husband and wife is intended by God for their mutual joy, for the help and comfort given each other in prosperity and adversity, and when it is God's will for procreation and nurture of children. Therefore, marriage is not to be entered into lightly, but reverently, deliberately, and with the purpose for which it was instituted by God. For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." I had to make a call on this one, so I turned to Lilith and said, "Lilith, will you have this woman to be your wife; to live together with her in the covenant of marriage? Will you love her, comfort her, protect and keep her, in sickness and in health as long as you both shall live?" There normally was a "forsaking all others" clause, but that ship had sailed and I couldn't expect a demon with two children to do that. "I do," she nodded. Then I turned to Aqorm, having to improvise, "Aqorm, will you have this woman to be your husband; to live together with her in the covenant of marriage? Will you love her, comfort her, honor and bless her, in sickness and in health as long as you both shall live?" She also vowed, "I do." I announced they were married under the city of Shoten, and they kissed before we headed back. Lilith still looked guilty, probably because while she was married to one family, her other child would probably grow up without a second parent. I didn't know what to do. But maybe it would work itself out?

AMBROSIA

Nevras said, "Draw your last pathetic card." I shook my head, as my deck had no pathetic cards, but it did have... "Void," I said, laying down a card face up, with an image of what looked almost like a black hole, with the dim letters naming the card, the word «**Void**» black on blackish, which its description, «*Flip all adjacent cards, unless otherwise noted. Limit one per game round, discard any others*.» Nevras groaned. Nobody could play, so I had won. We were playing Runes, a game some wizard thought

up at a time when people really didn't understand how thaumaturgy worked yet. It was a game where you put down cards on a grid. There was a deck of 52 cards (although you could buy more cards including expansions), forty of which were the eight cards of the five suits: Fire, Water, Earth, Wood, and Wind. These cards interacted with each other much like rock-paper-scissors. We played on a 5 row x 7 column grid until there were no cards left or nobody could play. However, the number 7 was regarded as sacred, so only six of these columns could affect each other, the seventh could not be harmed, yet could affect those outside it. It was sorta like the safe spaces in the game of Sorry.

You had five cards, but if you ran out, you were allowed to draw one card while the game continues. Otherwise, you only drew the opening round, when you were allowed to discard sucky hands. After everyone discarded those cards they didn't want, the deck was shuffled and they drew, which meant you could be getting other people's sucky hands. Also, sucky cards were subjective, because what mattered was the situation that you played them. The wrong card could be **deadly**.

Each turn, one of the players lays down one card. Well, unless you're stacking two cards on top of each other, then the limit per turn is one basic card and one stack card. You can also use your turn to stack a previous card with an effect, draw one card if they have none and there are still empty spots, trade cards with another player (this is done face down, so the player has no idea if they're getting good cards), or pass if they don't want to go this turn. You can play anywhere on the grid that's not active, but a card is considered still active until flipped over by an “attack.” This means that if I were to play an Earth card next to a Wood card or a Wood next to a Fire card, I would get my card flipped. If an adjacent card lost to me, that card would get flipped. Flipping an opponent's card gains me points, but such cards can be unflipped if in later turns that card is attacked. Points operate on a scale fashion, so you can gain or lose points, counting points until the round ends, and points are added to totals. You could play until someone got 50 points, or you could just count the points to the winner of the round, and play as long (or short) as you wished. We were doing the latter, and this was like our 30th game.

In general, Fire loses to Water, Water loses to Earth, Earth to Wood, and Wood lost to Wind (and Fire). But there were a lot of confusing sub-rules. Like, Wood could be “planted” near Wind, but “old” Wood would lose to Wind. Turn order made a difference, so while Fire lost to established Water (just as you can't start a fire in an ocean), Water also lost to established Fire (a raging fire would steam out small amounts of water). In some cases, however, the card is turned upside-down and “weakened.” If nothing strengthens it, like Wood for instance, the Fire card loses to the next Water card.

We didn't have an expansion deck, so we didn't have to worry about Force, Ice, Thunder, Acid, or Cosmic cards or the many many stackable cards. But there were 12 other cards. 4 of these were Dark cards, which countered all of the five main elements (though Fire played after could weaken it). Four Dark cards played in a square formation with a gap between each was colloquially called a Negative Zone or Death Square, because you couldn't play much without it getting flipped. About the only counter was a Light card, which counters and blocks Dark without being weakened by multiple ones, or the Void card, which flips everything around it. There's three Light cards, but only one Void card allowed per round, because it is ***ahem*** broken. The remaining cards were Dispel which unstacked any card it was played on effectively returning both into the deck, Restoration which explicitly cannot be flipped and which unflips one adjacent card or prevents adjacent ones from being flipped, Reverse which is stacked between two cards and reverses their relationship or effects (for example, being stacked between Light and Dark means that suddenly Light loses to Dark), and finally Protection which is removed when something would flip the card it is stacked below it, protecting that card.

I had said this game was to “help form battle strategies,” and it did teach how to think strategically with its complicated behavior rules. But mostly, it was to have fun while waiting for the others to get back. I was having trouble justifying these sidequests lately, and Nevras was beginning to doubt. We shuffled again, not knowing this would be our last game before the others returned. Nevras, Azrael, Zoe, and Yazim Jianne played with me while the others watched. This meant that typically, everyone drew near the end of the game. I drew a pair of Wood cards, an Earth card, a Light card, and a Restoration

card. Bleh. Restoration could restore 1 lost point from a flip, but it had limits, so it usually wound up being a worthless card.

Yazim Jianne discarded his whole deck, Azrael and Nevras discarded one card each, then I placed this and the extra Wood face down, and Zoe didn't seem to worry about her deck. We sat in order of youngest to oldest, with Yazim Jianne being oldest in his late thirties, Azrael being in her early thirties, Nevras being a year older than me, I was 21, and lastly Zoe was eighteen but about to be nineteen.

Yazim Jianne played Dark on 2b, and Azrael shrugged and played Dark on 4b. These were usually safe defensive moves that allowed them to passively score points if any players hit adjacent spots. But with my Light card, I could score two points by placing it between them, and that area nearby would free up for playing cards. But Nevras was next, and he of course had my old Restoration card. He played it right between those two on column 3, row b, effectively making eight spots. I looked at my new cards from the deal. I had a Reverse card, and a Fire card. Since Restoration was not only preventing flip of the two Dark cards, but the Dark cards themselves created a lot of unplayable zones, I did the only sensible thing and stacked Reverse between Restoration 3b and Dark 4b. Azrael had to check the rulebook on this, because we weren't sure whether reversing Restoration destroyed it or what would happen. It turned out they had incidental rules for stuff like this. That Dark became strong against Fire and Light and could be flipped by most of the other elements, while more interesting was the Restoration was flipped and stopped preventing adjacent areas from flipping. So I scored 1 point entirely without intending to. Azrael passed.

Yazim's turn came again, and he started it by flipping the reversed Dark. “The rules say that when both cards Reverse is stacked on are flipped, the Reverse card is discarded to the bottom of the deck and those involved in flipping the cards each get one point.” I asked, “So that means Yazim and I each have 2 points?”

Hefting the massive tome that was the rules, she shook her head, “Nope. The rules define what you did as a passive flip. That is, technically you didn't directly flip the card by attacking it. Cards that are passively flipped remain flipped because there is no way to unflip them, but the point is not added, because you lose the point when Reverse is gone then add it back for helping to remove Reverse. So Yazim is at two, and you're still at one point.” Azrael cleverly played Wood, knowing that it would soak up water. This unflipped the Dark card, which would have flipped Water if it were not already flipped due to Dark having its original state again. Nevras set down a Earth card in spot 1a, knowing that anyone trying to play a Light card in 2a or 1b would be blocked, since earth obstructs light. On the other hand, since light nurtures plants, I was free to place Light next to the opposite Dark card. Zoe decided to put a Fire card right above the Dark card, placing it on 2a. This didn't earn her any points, but it weakened the Dark card, turning it so its picture displayed upside-down. Yazim couldn't act against his own card nor could Nevras, so Yazim Jianne passed, Azrael placed a Wind card on mainly to secure the corner (since it would not take her card, but now Wind could take cards that tried to threaten the Wood card she'd played earlier), and Nevras played a Fire card in 1e knowing that after his turn passed Fire would be difficult to counter. I played Fire on 1b, flipping the second Dark card (finally) and weakening the Earth card. But there was no way to take that card because of its position in the corner. At least, that's what I thought. After Zoe secured the last corner at 7e with Water, then Yazim Jianne countered Light with Earth, and Azrael placed a Wind card in 3a where it seemed to have no purpose. When she flipped the Earth card, I accused her, “You cheated!” She pointed to page 250 and read, “Cards can be strengthened or weakened. If a card that is already acted against another card is strengthened, then you count its effect again, flipping any cards that are weakened. This is called transference. The card transferred through and the card hit are discarded... I guess that means this.” She said as she she removed the Fire card and Earth card from play. She read some more, “The card transferred to (Earth) cannot have the same card placed on it or be played upon by the same person, and the card transferred through (Fire) is considered a ley line. Uh... let's see, page 706 says that ley lines are areas rich in natural energy where underground energy collects. Ley lines are one of several energy sources, that can be flipped with the right card choice... and then it talks

about how to form the others."

The corner was now open, and it was Nevras's turn. Since he hadn't any points, he just added Void to 1c to flip the Fire card I had played earlier. He gained a point from me, and I was kinda pissed. I played my Wood card in the corner knowing it would be safe from Fire, and because I would probably get a point for using Wood on something underground. Sure enough, I got my point back, but Azrael said the ley line was still there, so nobody could play on it. I looked at the number of spots that were still free, and there weren't many left. This was serious business, and I would need to win, or I would forfeit my soul. It was time to... uhhh play more seriously. Anyway, the others played their cards and soon it was my turn again. There weren't too open spots left. The endgame was all about not placing the card in the wrong spot. It was tense stuff, and they'd left maybe two spots for me. No wait, three, that I could see anyway. I couldn't always keep straight which elements countered what, so I just placed the Earth card in the center and hope for the best. "Congratulations, you won!" Azrael said. Huh? But I just put it in a safe spot. I didn't win anything!

She explained that on page 1464 of the rulebook (I realized only later that this game rulebook was slightly longer than *War and Peace*) near the end, they described special plays that were considered an instant win if they were managed. Of these, the most difficult to play was the Grand Harmony Tao formation, which won not only the round but also the game, regardless of how many points you needed. The idea was, that if you actually managed this one, you were probably cooperating just to see if you could do it, because if one person tried it, they were either blessed by God, or cheating and it was time to end the game anyway. This would have been like the equivalent of playing *Yu-Gi-Oh*, and not only drawing three Egyptian God cards, and not only also having the The Creator God of Light Horakhty to merge the three, but also using them to fight against Zorc Necrophades. These cards were so rare that such a game wouldn't even happen unless everyone worked together to make it play out exactly as it had in the anime. And just as insane apparently was this combination, it required an expanded board (which most people didn't own, and had column 12 take the place of column 7 with more rows as well), and for 64 cards to be placed in a complex circle requiring a massively expanded deck, with the center area to have Light and Dark make a literal Yin Yang pattern. Most of these sequences could counter each other, so after the entire pattern was made, it would wind up face down. The next player would need to play a Reset card somewhere on the safe column to unflip everything. And since you somehow had to draw just the right cards and lay them down, it was a team effort and a game-ending move.

But thankfully, most of the other ones which just won a round like Five Elements Pentagram (you had to make a pentagon, and it had to be in the right order, but otherwise this was simple to do if you weren't blocked by flipping) or the Five Winds (what I had just done apparently, four different people had to place the corner pieces, they had to be Wood, Wind, Water, and Fire and the center must be the exact center of the board and be filled with Earth), or Light Conquers Death (basically, you just had three Light cards in a triangle around four Dark in a square) were easy to play.

I kinda wanted to play again just to see if we could do some of the harder patterns. But not long after I won, Aqorm and the others came back. It was a good thing too. I couldn't justify playing this game any longer.

THE WORLD

In another land, three others were also playing Runes. Satan said, "***Your move***." Now many people believe Satan is the enemy of God, but they have been deceived by the flowery words of John Milton. All things in this existence have a purpose. Satan was ordained by God to be an angel, a messenger of a bad message, the message that one is accused. He originally wasn't this sort of messenger, but he made a choice. And God respected it. It was God's nature to make light out of darkness, and to bring balance. God said nothing as he played the hand, for any words on his part could affect the outcome. On God's other side stood Estheriel, the angel who had left Heaven because he disagreed with human free will. But God never leaves any of his creations, not really. So God invited both of them to this game.

Unlike the other game, God had managed to convince the other two to cooperate. And so, they were helping to create the Grand Harmony Tao formation. So far, they had a circle of 64 cards, all that way needed was to create the Tao in the center. The Yin Yang was almost complete, only about four cards were left. God passed. Estheriel set down a Light card, and Satan followed by Dark. The two cards remaining were the Void card, and the Reset card, which since there were only two card left in the deck was sure to be drawn soon. "***Just two more cards***," Satan said. Then God played, placing the Void card square too far down. But it was too late. Cards once played couldn't be taken back. They could only be changed or removed by other cards. Satan groaned. It was Estheriel's turn, and he played two cards, the Redirect card and one face down off the board. Two cards could theoretically be played during a single turn, but only if you placed one as a "delayed spell." In any case, the Redirect card put the Void card in the proper place, flipping all adjacent cards, which would need the last card to play, the Reset card. Satan didn't have it, and the rules stated that once flipped, the Reset card had to be played immediately, which was the key reason this had never in memory been done. Satan didn't have it, but he asked God, who having an affinity to that card, of course drew it in the first round. God traded his card for an extra Wood card, and Satan set it down in position. Just as he was to claim victory, Estheriel flipped his face down card up, declaring, "I will never let a demon like you win!" The card was Prohibition, which prevented the play of one card, and Estheriel of course chose the Reset card. They spent the rest of the game squabbling with each other while God groaned at the inability of good and evil to simply get along and play a game together. But then, this world wasn't supposed to be perfect.

CHAPTER 15

In which a cat of sorts crawls out of a metaphorical bag.

AMBROSIA

It was probably time to come clean to Nevras about these sidequests. I had managed to keep Nevras occupied with fishing, building projects, bounty hunting, and so on. He wasn't gonna buy this much longer.

NEVRAS

It was weird. We had been going to all of these places, because Ambrosia said that it was mandatory for us to get training before facing down Belial. But lately, she had been more focused on me than her quest. She kept saying there was no rush and her "I like to take my time, I like to do it right" attitude seemed to pervade her daily outlook. She had been spending more time with me, and I was glad of that. But some of these training quests... she had us gather song sheets for Aqorm, and had her practice at bars. She had Lilith pick up the right knife for becoming a chef. I suppose it was okay, as some of these character sidequests did awaken ultimate weapons. But then, most of the party was allowed to go on dates. Not that I'm complaining about our dates, mind you. But... I mean, we went to trade items only for a reward of sushi. That one made me start thinking.

"Hey ummm, Ambrosia, not to be nosy, but when are we going to enter the Void?" I asked. It was an honest question, as we had celebrated Christmas at the village from Christmas Eve to Epiphany, among other things. While I expected an answer, what I didn't expect was her to start bursting into tears. She bawled, "I had no choice! I needed to spend time with you! You were gonna leave me, and I made up all of this as an excuse!" Wait, what?!? I asked, "What do you mean I was gonna leave you?" She explained, "Ohhhh ummm, I guess I'm busted. Look, you remember how sometimes we'd die and God would Reset things? Well ummm, there was a whole timeline where I went into the Realm of Void, but you didn't really follow me, saying that ummmm I don't remember because it sounded like an excuse."

I had to verify this, "We're going to Heaven. Right now." She scratched her head, confused, "Why Heaven?" I stated what should be obvious, "God sees everything, right? So, he should be able to show me what happened." And so, we boarded Bahamut, taking the others along for the ride. The first time we came here, we came on foot, so it was weird to just fly in on Bahamut. I was so worried that she'd crush those clouds or

something. Everything seemed okay, though.

Once in Heaven, we passed a lot of angels, who looked at us funny. After a minute or two, I realized why. We had Michael as an archangel with us, which was startling enough, but we also had a demon with us. And yet, despite all the funny looks, nobody actually teased or bullied us in Heaven. Also, we kind of were riding in on a dragon.

We came again to God's tent, Ambrosia and I entered alone, and we explained our reason for being here. *I will show your alternate realities,* God said, *keep in mind though, even the past branches into probabilities, and the future is even more uncertain.* And so, he showed us a vision.

The rift had stabilized into a regular Gate, and was no longer sucking matter inside or pulling it out. Bahamut was able to land much closer as a result. The group rejoined Azrael and Zoe, who looked much stronger as a result of fighting difficult battles, but were tired. We stepped closer and closer and closer to the Gate, obviously nervous but willing to enter a strange new world. But then... " I think this is as far as we go together," I said. "Sorry." Ambrosia looked shocked. "But why?" she asked. I sighed, and then made up something that was obviously an excuse, "I don't really feel like I know you that well yet, and going to another world takes a lot of commitment. I'm just not ready. Besides, I've got obligations to take care of at home... You know, at the palace." She sighed, "I understand." I got on Bahamut's back, whispering, "Take me home, please." As I rode Bahamut back home, wind whipping my hair around, I asked Bahamut, "Hey ummm, can we chat?" She said, "Hold on, I'll drop you at Phoenix where there's ground." She landed at the foot of Phoenix Castle. Bahamut took a moment, and she surrounded her body with a gigai, crunching her bones down to fit inside the much smaller skin. "Clothing," she said, and I scrounged around my backpack for ummm... extra clothes. A girl with green eyes, and onyx hair that glistened like the rainbow with a borrowed brown cotton dress looked back at me. "Well? What did you want to talk about?" I opened with a question, "Bahamut, have you ever been in love?" She explained about how dragons don't have sex normally, and how the female never feels anything for the male. I worried, "Does Ambrosia feel that way about me? Was it one-sided? Is that why things never got serious?" She giggled, "C'mon now! I don't personally know about love, but I've seen you humans. I know it when I see it. She's definitely into you! What's really the problem?" I explained my fortune. She laughed while pressing her hand a few inches from her mouth, "Ohohohoho! You silly human! If you love her, tell her how you feel! Don't let your terrible luck ruin your life! You go to her." I thought about it and said, "You know what? I will go back to her! I can change my destiny. Only..." She asked, "Only, what?" I explained, "Only, she's probably given up and gone in by now. My best chance is to wait at the portal, because I'll get separated if I try to go after her inside there. It's a big world in there, but she'll have to come out there!" And so, I waited. Here, destiny branched. I saw two options, either I waited for about a month then assumed she was dead, or I never stopped waiting seeing myself become old and gray. Meanwhile, I saw Ambrosia. She made it into the Void, where grey covered everything, muting out all color. I saw her travel the world by boat, being careful not to spend too much time outside. I saw her make it to the Tower of Sorrow after visiting Belial's Castle and failing to get in. I saw her pushing through the Void Wastes until finally she got to the Mountain of Fate. She went up the mountain with her friends, but insisted on going to the peak alone. I saw her come down, and take the Transport Coin. I saw her use the Tao abilities but there was something off, like she was really cocky afterward and abused the heck out of her abilities. When she used them against Belial, however, she died, and then everything faded to white. The vision ended.

God explained that what happened after this is redacted, and could not be shown to any normal humans, which despite our strength and skill we still qualified as. Then God said, *Reality branches in the past as well as the future. There is another past, in which you survive, Ambrosia. Would you like to see it?* I nodded. Why wouldn't I see a less depressing version of my past? *Alright then, I'll show you*, he said.

In this reality, I waited as before. But this time, instead of fighting Belial with her Resonance, the others fought, and realizing they couldn't beat Belial, Azrael told them,

"Everyone leave this building, I am going to ring this Bell." They stood outside and despite being unable to hear anything due to the thick walls of the castle, the very edge of the castle vibrated slightly. As I looked around from my omniscient viewpoint, I saw the grass nearby dying. They went back inside to check for any bodies. Azrael said, "It's over guys, Belial is gone forever." Then, her body crumpled to the ground. Zoe called out, "Azrael!!!" They buried her body outside and Zoe used her magic to grow flowers. Afterward, we returned to the New Earth via the portal we came through. She was years older, for time didn't pass at the same rate inside the Realm of Void as it did outside. Apparently, they had become lost on the way back, looking for an open portal. Ambrosia and I continued to adventure, touring the country. The vision ended. We refused to watch any other alternate realities, thanking God for his help. Before we left however, God asked if we wanted to fight him. *It will help you feel ready for a fight with Belial,* he said, *Ambrosia, I know you are afraid, but this will help you come to terms with your battle and what is to come afterward.*

We agreed to a battle, so long as God didn't destroy us forever. He couldn't promise this, but he promised that he wouldn't die, which was a relief I guess? He also agreed to bring us back afterward. After three rounds of battle, all of us were defeated.

It started out okay, with Azrael and Elias casting all kinds of buffs like Haste and Bless, then adding Protection prayer to prevent attacks. Then, we attacked with all sorts of elemental spells, Void attacks, and even Hellfire. None of it did any good, and then God did ridiculously underpowered attacks like poking us, flicking at us with his finger, and even blowing on us. It was devastating! We were beaten within an inch of our lives, and our best attacks left not even a scratch. Even Cthulhu wasn't this insanely powerful. *See?* God said, *now you feel better about fighting Belial, don't you*? Well, I suppose I understood that Belial wasn't nearly the worst I could face, but I'm not sure it really made me feel better. I still wasn't confident I'd beat Belial.

"Just one more thing," Ambrosia asked God, "since I lived through my first battle with Belial, I want to know why I lost. My Tao ability was so powerful, but...." God explained, *The Tao is powerful, fully as powerful as I Am. But it can only be used as effectively as its user. The Tao can be used in a state of emotional Balance, in which case there are not side-effects. When they are manic or depressed, there is an imbalance of Yin or Yang. Nevras broke up with you, you said. This is why you sucked.* Huh. I wasn't aware that God was in the habit of saying the word "sucked." In any case, we were set here, so next it was time to head to the Realm of Void.

Our trip back on Bahamut was slower than usual. Typically, she would get us from Point A to Point B with wind blowing so quickly that we usually had to hang on tightly and there was never much time to talk, but right now her pace was more like the aerial version of a horse's gentle trot. "Hmmm?" I spoke up, "Does it seem like Bahamut is kinda just gliding along?" Ambrosia nodded, "Yeah kinda... what's up Miss Dragon?" Bahamut spoke, her lyrical voice somehow carrying to us in the rush of wind, "It's just... I've been carrying you around, back and forth since I joined you humans, and you seem different right now. What has happened?" As the winds blew a gust of cold air at us, and I shivered, we explained recent events. Bahamut typically kept us warm by her body hear, which was much like a hummingbird in that she was significantly cooler during activity than when she was in relative torpor, so contrary to what one might expect, the faster she went, the more comfortable it was. Bahamut had known some of our past from riding with us, and she knew some of it from hanging with us in human form, but this latest development definitely needed to be explained. "...And that's what happened," I explained. Bahamut nodded, "I had wondered why you humans took so many side trips. If you'd just asked me, I could have told you that time reset. We dragons don't forget such things like you humans!" I grumbled for awhile at everyone keeping secrets from me. Seriously, a dragon should know better!

BELIAL

I had waited for those mortals to stop me long enough. If they wouldn't come to meet their doom, I would bring it to their Earth. Gathering my power, I summoned forth meteors and darkness, and even Void itself, as I had done in ages past. Brimstone fell and

burned woods into waste, the shadows were unsafe to walk in for they rotted the flesh off your skin, but worst of all was the Void. People would be walking around and suddenly the road would disappear, the ground would disappear, or even the person walking. I would get my revenge. I would make the world go away.

GOD

I need to talk about Harry Harlow. Many years ago, or as Ambrosia would say, awhile back, a scientist studied rhesus monkeys. He began his studies with the intent to show the importance of caregiving and companionship on social and cognitive development, specifically in response to a generation of therapists that insisted mothers weren't important and physical contact was considered harmful to infant development. Many unwanted children wound up in adoption clinics back then, so he studied this on a non-human subject. This sounded like the best intentions, and in an ideal world, it would have been. But this world is not ideal, it is designed to help those souls born into it grow more mature. He started his tests with switching milk between a cloth or wire surrogate "monkey," which the monkeys overwhelmingly chose the soft one even when food was given, using the other only when hungry. Then he tried abandonment and reintroduction, or replacement of monkey parents with surrogates. The monkeys that were abandoned tended to be lonely or depressed, while those raised by a surrogate tended to be odd, ending with those raised by nonliving surrogates like dolls being practically autistic.

But it gets worse. When his own wife died and he was treated by shock therapy, his tests profoundly changed. Medical therapy at the time was... lacking in sense. You don't cure a man's grief by torturing him! Following her death, Harlow began to set up something called the Pit of Despair, suspending these monkeys in a constant state of fear and nervousness, often setting those involved in extreme isolation in close corners, but like some of the 20th century prisons, it was set up so the monkey would also be tied to a "rape rack" and torturing surrogate mothers called iron maidens. The same way as Harry himself in response to loss and torture, they went psychotic. You might ask why I bring this up. It is because this is Belial's past.

Long ago, when the Earth was young, Belial was a new demon. He was born with a human heart and soul, something I repeated in Lilith. The demons of old were simply split off evil from angels, they were barely defined as life, more to be pitied than hated. Belial was driven from his village for being kind. He was left to wander alone. Most mortal weapons do not injure a demon's rough skin, but town guards used cold iron, silver, and elven to torture his body and drive him away. To simply tell him that he was not welcome by putting up walls to prevent his entry would be fine, but instead they left their gates open and enforced their safety with cudgels. Belial grew bitter and he lashed out and attacked his attackers. And yet, to his credit, he never really became psychotic like the monkeys, because he knew he had a choice. But then, Estheriel and Michael came, and sealed him inside an urn, trapped in darkness for an interminable period. From out of the urn, Belial harnessed darkness and Void, as Belial sought to destroy everything. And he might have, if it were his to destroy, but he destroyed nothing. For you see, I split the world into the New Earth and the Realm of Void. His demon kind would have befriended him here, but he had nobody, trapped as he was inside an urn.

CHAPTER 16

In which Ultimate Weapons are found.

AMBROSIA

"Wait, wait," said Aqorm, "before we head to the Realm of Void, I want weapons that aren't gonna fail me." Azrael also nodded, "This weapon is property of an angel. If I die, they'll be prevented from doing their duties until my weapon is collected. I want a weapon suited for me." I wasn't fond of this last detour, but to fair, I had done things like stop to collect song sheets. One more trip couldn't hurt.

And yet somehow we sat and waited in a pub while Aqorm played hit songs from her Song Book. All because of some legend that the book was key to a powerful weapon. She had just finished page 284 of the songs, playing *Tribute* by Tenacious D, when one of

the people in the pub approached her. He was a tall burly man vaguely similar to the guy who always used to bully Popeye in the show. What was his name again? Reaching into his pockets, he pulled out a pair of knives. “I have no money to pay for your performance,” he said, “All I have is these shabby-looking knives.” The knives were not shabby. They were forged from an odd metal that was clear like crystal, and which glowed with ancient Fey runes. Aqorm nodded, and carefully contained her excitement, “I suppose that will have to do.” As he left, we could no longer contain ourselves so we quietly slipped to the upper room of the pub. “**Holy crap!**” Aqorm said, staring at her find. The Song Book had mentioned basically this weapon, a pair of Twin Daggers made from elven using a process long forgotten, yet known for strength and beauty. These daggers had many of the traits of her old ones, but it was much stronger to the point where she used it to break the others, and the runes made it hard enough and sharp enough that it was able to cut a line deep into the wall of the room. “Hey,” said Nevras, “try not to destroy the insulation.” We spent the next couple of days in this pub earning real money to put in the bank, before finally getting bored and leaving.

When last we talked to King Charis, he mentioned that the weapon in his catacombs was some sort of weapon with mystical powers, so Azrael tried this next, hoping to get a sword to replace Raphael. Nevras showed us to the old vault, which turned out to not be as much of a trip as I thought. I was expecting some great maze-like area like the Four Gods dungeon, but instead it was a simple walk downstairs with a hallway to a large gated door.

Now, it was certainly secure. The stones looked like the stuff in Aiken Monastery, and probably couldn't have been punched through without serious magic beyond what any of us had. And the door resisted even Lilith's attempts to just barge in with Hellfire. I reminded them that in fact none of this was necessary, that I had the key right here. But Lilith still looked disappointed. With a simple turn of the key, the vault unlocked, but it was built to be secure against rust and the elements, so it wasn't going to open that easily. Several of us including Lilith pushed together, but to no avail. Then Elias, carefully examining the door, announced, “Hey everyone, this door is a sliding door. It moves sideways. Like this!” With little effort, he slid the doors open, revealing a rather underwhelming treasure. There were no gems in this vault, no gold or jewels, no weapons that I could see. Only books.

ELIAS

Obviously, the others couldn't appreciate the treasure they had found here. Why, this room had preserved records of the entire history of Phoenix, from its origin to its dark ages where fighting, plague, and famines dominated the region. It contained secrets long buried of technology and alchemy, and thanks to some of these I was able to come up with more formulas for use in battle, as well as a number of crafting and synthesis recipes for building lost devices. Many of these were worthless to me, but I persisted in my studies. At long last, my hunt paid off. Inside a book titled «*Landmarks and Artifacts of Ancient China*» I found a page that seemed more than slightly suspect. The rest of the book had either mountains, architecture, or ancient historical legends. The text in the nearby pages seemed consistent, until I got to one page where I saw a drawing of a bronze sword. Sure, the page and the back looked like they fit, but a careful read convinced me that the page before and the page after were meant to go together, the text on the back was copied from another book, and when looking at the picture it didn't look quite like an actual photo but rather artwork made to look like photography. It pained me to do so, but I ripped out this page. I was traumatized for a few minutes.

Examining more closely, I pulled out some spectroscopic glasses. Runes and alchemic formulae were sometimes hidden under the dyes or inks of other writing, but they still emitted light and energy at a constant rate. Putting the glasses on, I saw a dizzying array of both patterns. This wasn't a real object at all! Rather, it was a schematic for creating an object, and making it real enough that it could be summoned into being and persist as long as I lived. Whoever devised this was a genius!

I didn't need a sword, but I could certainly use a replacement for my bronze shakujo, since it had gotten pretty banged up. With this model, I would not only have a brand new

weapon every time, but I could in theory custom-make it. I began drafting up an alchemic synthesis schematic for something nearly identical in appearance to the shakujo but with greatly altered durability and weight.

I carefully examined the schematic. The layout appeared to be a giant pentagon (not to be confused with a pentagram) with five distinct circles. After cross-referencing this with existing books of alchemy that I owned, it appeared to be a method to circulating ley lines to gather natural energy (*senju*). The bottom of the diagram had runes for Wood in high volume, flowing into the one for Water which enriched the first, which in turn gave way to the top circle for Earth, followed by Fire, ending in Wind, and cycling back to Wood. This model showed two such diagrams, one with the symbols for Earth (the planet, not the element) and the other with symbol for Man. These two diagrams had arrows going from one two another. I had more research to do. In one book, I found a passage, «The essence of alchemy is understanding the interplay between mankind and the natural world. The human lives due to a ley system within their body. Most wonder-workers use their own energy to push ambient runes into distinct spells, while elves use the ley system to grant them unending youth and guide magic in the natural world for the purpose of producing magic. Doing so involves a lighter touch than conventional magic. The alchemist on the other hand, can directly tap into the *dantian* or *senju* equally. The former is known as Inner Alchemy and is useful for the purpose of replicating the elves' natural affinity to immortality through the use of effort, while the purpose of Outer Alchemy is threefold. It can be used to enrich the land through geomancy, it can be used to deplete the land turning its energy into a catalyst, or it can be used to form lasting physical objects. The methods of Synthesis, however, are not fully understood, so many attempts toward Synthesis result in flawed or temporary objects. Care must be made to build the land up as a ley point, by circulating *senju* and dragon seeds, and if possible connect the existing ley point to nearby ley lines...» The passage trailed ever onward, but the idea was pretty clear. Most Synthesis failed to work because it forgot to build the strong connection between Inner and Outer Alchemy, between the land and the self, or because it failed to properly circulate sufficient energy in the first place. I experimented around with creating tunnels and rooms around the vault, and using complicated *feng shui* to boost energy, until finally grass began to grow underground, as a sign of the system being set up. I returned to the vault, and began to spread the dragon seeds (the strong *senju* energy only gathered from the balance of elements) into the ley point, solidifying its power, while I drew *senju* into my own body. Then I channeled this outward to a point on the ground, until it “grew” a bronze shakujo nearly identical to the one that I owned. I would name this creation the Mystic Sutra, since it was a weapon of writing and not common metal. Aqorm also helped me pick it because “It sounds cool.”

On my first attempt, however, it was a complete and utter failure. This method used far more runes than alchemy than the Philosopher's Stone that I had made, and turned out to be far less solid, so much so that my hands actually passed through when attempting to touch it. Azrael had to tutor me in the art of making objects solid, before this worked. Despite this training, I was not able to alter my magic itself like Azrael could, I simply had gained the ability to make a lasting solid object. And while I probably could alter the other alchemy formulas to likewise make fully real objects, each one would require relearning the alchemy formula. What I did manage was impressive, though. It was so solid that testing its strength against real bronze caused the other to shatter, to say nothing of the runes I had added to the formula to make it a bane against the undead and spirits. The fact that I could now summon it anywhere and at any time was also a pretty good deal. Once I successfully created this weapon, which I did, I had a lasting connection between myself and the land, which meant I was able to summon it freely from then on.

Ambrosia said, “Seriously, what is it with you people and smashing your old weapons?” I gave her the scraps, which she took to a jeweler make a few necklaces and bracelets.

AZRAEL

The climb was as steep as we remembered, but I needed to do it. We had been flying around Bahamut so much that we had forgotten that there were places that she couldn't

go. She couldn't dive underwater (mainly because of us), and she couldn't fly out of the New Earth, but more important to right now, after last time where we had just barged in and caused a commotion on Bahamut, we couldn't directly enter the floating island of Heaven. When she tried, a powerful wind pushed her back. It seemed like right now at least, there was too much turbulence surrounding the island. And so it was that we had to make it up the mountain again.

It took longer than expected, but eventually, I was standing on the fluffy soil of Heaven. Heaven was a place that was slightly different every time you encountered it. The first time, the area was filled with trees and mushrooms and strange animals, while the second time it was empty but for the angels we passed by. Heaven was a land of perception, and being in a hurry made it a much different place from when we explored it the first time. This time, it was strangely solemn, like a forest at night. There was something in the air that vaguely resembled fireflies. These were *hitodama,* what many people call remnants, a bluish flame-like light that was from the souls of the dead. I had a duty to do here, and they were there to join me. When the people who entered Heaven were stressed, storms of cherry blossoms appeared; when they were calm, Heaven looked like it had the first visit; and when there was a duty to do, it had a solemn appearance. While Hell exerted its will on others, Heaven was affected by its residents.

As promised, I delivered Raphael's sword back to Heaven, asking in exchange for where I might find a sword to replace it. “Hmmm,” he said, thinking hard about this. The angel itched at his wings, then scratched his head. Finally, he spoke, “I have no idea. Sorry. But I'll ask God about it.” They conferred in private, until Raphael came back with a glass bottle filled with a faint light surrounded by a thick black fog, a miasma of sorts, from the looks of it. “What is this?” I asked. Raphael explained, “It is called *negaigoto*. This glows brighter when you come closer to your heart's desire. When you do, the glass breaks and what is inside is released. Just speak aloud what you must want.” Before that I asked, “But what exactly **is** inside that bottle?” He shook his head, “Light and darkness. In order to secure your deepest desire, and equal amount of misfortune must be contained within the bottle. In short, to make this item, several thousand people had to suffer greatly. Once you have achieved your desire, their fortune will be returned to them, and you will receive a great curse.” I shrugged. I had dealt with curses before. There was no way this could be that bad. Could it?

In any case, I told it my wish, “I wish to find the ultimate sword for an exorcist like me. A sword to replace and surpass Raphael's sword.” The bottle's light flashed, and then dimmed. We were far from our heart's desire right now. It took a few more hours to walk down the mountain, but once we managed this, we got on Bahamut and flew around for awhile. For most places, the light was relatively dim, but it grew brighter as I went near Goji. Since we had a pretty precise area to work with, I landed Bahamut. Figuring that a powerful weapon would likely be buried in a grave or crypt, I checked up and down in town where there were a great number of creepy sites, but to no avail. I left and searched the desert, starting east of town. I made it all the way to the Four Gods temple, but it was beginning to get dimmer. So far, we were on the wrong track.

For the next few hours we spent our time playing the game of hot and cold. There was an old mental institution to the southeast, back when people believed they could fix people's tooth problems by gouging them with metal picks and drilling holes, and their mental problems by giving them shocks or large amounts of medication. Today, this building was in serious disrepair, and the spirits of all those tortured by their malpractice were still screaming. It was too bad that the bottle wasn't leading us here, but oh well, I guess we would have to go someplace else. To the south, a pyramid stood in the desert. Nobody could explain how it got there, because I hadn't noticed it before. But I saw more of those flying discs around it, and one noticed us and fired a beam and...

I... what was I talking about? Suddenly it was night, and I didn't know where the time had gone. My neck felt sore in a specific spot, and when I rubbed it, I felt something pebble-sized that felt almost metallic under my skin. Some of the others rubbed their necks too. Strange. The pyramid was impressive, but our treasure wasn't here either, judging from the lack of glow inside the jar.

Qurac likewise was dim, but the glow grew brighter on the western side of the

continent than the eastern, and since it dimmed as we headed south, we made our way north along the coast, stopping to catch seafood for dinner. We found the area where it was brightest. Seikai.

ZOE

Passing the pyramid made me think of Egyptian myth. In the Druid grove, my superiors told me of some of the myths and legends of the world. I learned about Norse legends, most of which appeared to involve misdeeds of Loki. And I learned of Greek legends, and of course about the Egyptians.

The Egyptians had a number of “gods” but it seemed to me now like these were misunderstood by the cultures around them. That they weren't gods at all but paths of life. For example, Ra was the “god of the sun” but extensive amount of his myth was involved in his daily pattern around the sun and then underground, or rather in phases of birth, death, and rebirth. The more I thought about it, I had been living kinda like Ra for awhile. That was kinda what I was doing until, well... I became eternal. The story of Osiris was most like mine now, he got his body cut into bits then joined back together. The secret to my divinity was my willingness to put myself at risk for her. Now my body would repair itself even if it was likewise torn apart. Then there were two other “gods,” Anubis and Khonsu. Anubis was “god of death” but actually more associated with the afterlife. Most people lived in this route. They lived, died and were either found wanting because their heart was heavy, or they went to the Field of Reeds (the Afterlife?) which echoed their life on Earth but was instead everlasting. Unlike the others, Khonsu was oddly much less known. This was largely because he was a friend or sometimes a subset of Thoth, probably, rather an independent deity. As such, Khonsu was associated with time and the moon, sorta being about eternity too, just by virtue of being in control of time. Khonsu appears in a number of roles, such as a child, provider, defender of the pharaoh and travelers, healer, aid in childbirth, one who drives out evil spirits, and ultimately the one who decides the lifespan of others. And the moon will appear to disappear completely for a time, but always returns.

I was now eternal, so my body went through some pretty serious stuff whenever I got hurt. It often healed me so quickly that it looked like I shrugged it off completely, but also able to recover from some serious gore like being torn to bits, disintegrated, immolated, or sucked into the Void. I was not at risk for ceasing to exist. But this brought with me some new worries, like getting stranded in space. Eternity was kinda creepy when you thought about it, especially spending it alone. If only she could also share in my life, as long as it lasted.

We entered Seikai. Before, it had simply been a large forest with distorted space and villagers trapped inside. But now that the people inside were freed, the area returned to what was probably its true form. A creepy-as-fuck haunted forest.

There were the ravens flying overhead cawing at us. Then there was the intense mist and constant rain, yet never fully flooding the area. As much as it rained, it could have been a mangrove swamp or something, but instead the ground was simply ankle-depth in in most places. All the same, most of us would have to worry about trench-foot, so I tried to lead them to safety. And above us, the moon was a constantly moving. It was a sort of bright twilight that played with our eyes, distorting time and our perception of it.

“This place is weird,” said Azrael she walked slowly to the left. “Tell me about it,” I said. “Hey guys,” said Ambrosia, “do you think there might be water snakes here?” Azrael flinched and turned right, “I hate snakes. Normally I'd chop off their heads, but now I have to worry about using magic before it bites me or something.” Nevras said, “Don't worry, I'll take care of one is we see it.” She continued ahead, then had to turn right because of a rock she almost bumped into. “Hey, Azrael,” I said, “Does this rock look kind of familiar?” She sighed deeply, “Oh no, we're going in circles.” The moon was waning quickly, as I asked, “Are we going to be stuck in here forever?” I never got the answer. The moon became new, and the others disappeared from their current spot.

Azrael appeared behind me. “This place is weird,” said Azrael she walked slowly to the left. I stood there slightly confused. She appeared in front of where I was standing, and repeated, “I hate snakes. Normally I'd chop off their heads, but now I have to worry

about using magic before it bites me or something." Ambrosia and Nevras likewise repeated their lines. I was displaced in time like the others. But eternity did mean my body and mind adjust to changes. I remembered that time had looped immediately, while the others kind of looped a lot more. Azrael appeared to my right, and informed me, "Oh no, we're going in circles." The only difference was that before, she had said this in response to me saying something, whereas now she did it because she had crossed my path three times while I stayed still. The moon became new again, and time repeated. Everyone had returned to their original positions.

The others all said their lines, moved in their paths, and time repeated.

The fourth time, I decided I wanted to end things. And so, I asked Ambrosia to use the Crest of Chronos on the bottle. She was confused, but obliged. I then offered to take the bottle telling the others that I wanted to try an experiment. I drew a circle around where I stood, and then walked to a nearby stone, to sit and wait until time cycled again. I fully expected my location to revert to the spot I had sat before, as it had done the first time, but to my surprise my position was unchanged! Progress!

Before Azrael wandered off this time, I caught her hand. "Stay with me, and watch what I see." She blushed, but held me by the hand and never let go. And she watched, as Ambrosia and Nevras wandered in various paths, time cycled, and they said the same stuff over and over again. She gasped, "A time loop! And I was caught in it..." I told her, "Ambrosia used her Crest of Time on this bottle, so it seems to repel changes in time, and protect both the user and those holding them." At these words she held me close by the waist, her breasts rubbing against my back. It was my turn to blush, but thankfully she couldn't see it right now.

I wasn't really clear on what to do, because my specialty was not magic analysis. I was lucky that I even thought about using the bottle as a source of protection, or I'd still be jumping back in time and space even now. So I asked her, "What's our plan for getting your weapon and getting out of here?" She told me, "Hold me very tightly, I'm gonna sit down." I grabbed her with one hand, holding the bottle carefully with the other as she moved around drawing a large circle with a stick. Zoe identified the branch I used as a *Nyssa aquatica* (water tupelo). Unlike my circle, which was just to reference position, this was a 30 ft radius circle with runes all along the rim. "*Close circle*," she said. The runes glowed and the edge of the circle glowed, and she said it was okay to stop holding her. The water drained outside the circle as well, revealing sandy soil.

For all intents and purposes, we were inside an area where the rules of this forest did not apply. The others of our group didn't seem able to see or hear us (and I tested it out by calling to Ambrosia), and walked through the circle passing by us like we were ghosts. Given the rather large area inside the circle, she used it as a makeshift blackboard to draft ideas, using a stick to draw in the damp sandy soil. "Let's see," she said, "The others are stuck in a time loop based on moon phases, limited by the perimeter of the forest. Now, given what we know from our last visit, these dimensions are the actual measurements of the total area..." I looked at some complicated math which seemed accurate but not necessarily relevant to our current situation. So I asked her, "So, as long as we stay holding hands we're immune to the effects of this place, correct? But the distortion is probably centered around the weapon we're looking for? So... what happens to the others when we find this weapon?" She began to sweat. "Well... it's possible this entire place will collapse trapping them inside. But, I'm not sure that would happen." My mouth kinda opened wide in shock. "Wait, you were okay taking me with you, and you didn't think to mention this?" I asked, outraged at her. She explained, "I didn't know what to do! Besides, you're the one that took me along, aren't you?" We argued for quite some time, while the others continued to auto-loop, repeating what they said or did forever, unaware of any other path. I suggested, "Couldn't we all hold hands together and make it to the weapon?" She shook her head, "No good. You and me, Ambrosia and Nevras, Lilith, Michael, Aqorm, Elias, Yazim Jianne and Selqui, that's ten people to manage. One of them could lean wrong or trip, and we could get in a pile while the bottle rolls away. Or one of us could lose our grip, and be trapped alone for all eternity. The idea of getting stuck alone forever is a bit frightening." She looked knowingly at me. She continued, "But we can't abandon them either..." I offered, "This circle is insulating us from this

area. Would it be safe if everything collapsed?" Her face brightened, "That might work! Even if everything does collapse, I should be able to rescue them since my runes are connected to me, and retain a physical location. Well, unless I die from something."

We spent some time convincing the others first that they were in a time loop, then getting them to agree to stick inside a magic circle that I had created. Lilith in particular wanted to stay outside, until Michael and Aqorm grabbed her from behind and pulled her in despite her protests. Free to explore, Azrael and I used the bottle as a dowsing device to scan the area. Rather than wandering in circles, we gradually found a path. Forest gave way to swampland, and the swamp eventually led to a small shrine. I would like to say that as we continued, the area became less creepy. I would like to say that, but it simply isn't true. If anything, the mood got darker. The swamp wasn't a simple wetland swamp with green plants, it was filled with dead and dying plants. The water was murky and the color of shale, and the air itself was heavy with darkness. Worse yet, the water was becoming deeper, making it a slow trip. I was still holding the bottle as it led us towards our goal, and we were holding each other. But things were hard right now.

As we approached the shrine, the bottle glowed brightly. Yet Azrael seemed frightened by something. The rain beat down hard on us, soaking our hair, as Azrael held me close. What could be wrong?

AZRAEL

My senses are slightly different from Zoe's, even when she's in her Sage form. For one thing, I can sense ghosts, undead, demons, and Monsters even when they are invisible. I held her close with fear, for the awesome power nearby was threatening to make me faint. The air shimmered where it floated, even though I had yet to see it.

In front of the shrine, a sword sat in the water. Despite being submerged up to the hilt in stagnant water, the sword was untouched by corrosion. Stranger still, the sword sat without sinking in muddy soil while persistent rain fell, and probably had for untold centuries. So powerful was this sword, that I could see runes floating in the air all around it. I could sense that this sword had probably claimed the lives of many otherwise clever and powerful would-be wielders, for it was away from the shrine where its stand was, and the shrine had long since fallen into disrepair. I could also sense this, because there was a thoroughly decayed corpse grasping the sword. If I was not careful, it would also consume my life.

A wave of energy from the invisible presence knocked us into the air, loosening our grip on one another. I flew forward near the sword, while she kept hold of her bottle as she fell hard backwards. I took a big gulp of brackish water as I fell in the muck, and spewed it back out, crawling to the surface. The moon was setting, and I had no protection, for I was too far from Zoe and her bottle. My only hope was to claim the sword before the moon returned back to new, or all of my time would be reset to start, and given what I experienced earlier, my memory as well.

There is a sword discovered in China, not in myth or legend but in real history. It was known as the Sword of Goujian, and it was found in an old tomb. This survived in submersion in water over 2000 years with the blade untarnished and still sharp through a combination of a tight sheath and a strange alloy of copper, tin, lead, iron, sulfur, and arsenic. It was a bronze broadsword with «King of Yue» written in ancient bird-worm seal script (the precursor of the Chinese language). This sword strongly resembled that sword, but the Sword of Goujian had a crack in it from a overseas exhibition, where the crate it was packed in bumped against the sword because of one of the workers being a clumsy oaf. I had always been convinced that this sword was a mere replica of the real sword; in other words, some people switched this sword for that one. It shouldn't have been damaged so easily if it had been the real deal. Those analyzing it had taken the real sword and made a convincing copy, giving those ingredients as what they used to make it themselves. The real one was taken to this shrine to protect this land, and was made of a heavenly alloy as it glowed with energy.

The sword drove me back with its pulse when I tried to reach for it. It is likely the testers had only been able to touch it indirectly, and even then, died prematurely. I understood the power of the sword now, and why it had killed those who had taken it

from its resting place. It was a sword of moon and time, created by the King of Yue. And many people falsely believe this refers to a nation called Yue, or more specifically Yuyue of the Zhou dynasty. This is incorrect. The word “Yue” means “moon.”

Now, I have a great number of spells and know all manner of symbols and runes. But runes were based on writing, and spells are based on a skill that being shy, I ironically suck at. Conversation. The ability to speak to others is more powerful than any magic. I said, “Ummm... excuse me. But ummm, I would like to use this sword. I contest claim with the current owner, the King of Moon.” The moon suddenly stopped waning, and time stopped. A voice came from the unseen form that attacked us earlier, “You who would wield this power, speak my name and face me in combat.”

The reason the sword would not accept me was that it was still *owned*. The writing on it clearly told who owned it, the King of Moon and the master of time. “Khonsu,” I said. And with that, two things happened. Well, three things. First, the writing on the sword suddenly erased, allowing me to touch it. It was about three feet long and pretty wide, but the sword was strangely light enough that I could lift it with one hand. Second, the bottle we had broke, releasing all the good back to those who it had taken from and hitting me with a Great Curse. The ravens that had been flying around before began to peck at me over the course of the battle. Lastly, Khonsu appeared. Khonsu kind of looked like a mummy, but for some distinctive hair braids. Zoe was put in time stasis for the battle, so I faced him alone.

I tried all manner of symbols and spells against him, but being protected by divine energy, he simply shrugged off the runes like nothing happened. He countered with his own magic, using beams of focused moonlight to bash at me, and randomly messing with time. I didn't yet know how to properly use the sword, but I managed to slash through some of his runes with the sword. He swung a khopesh in combat against me, and it was all that I could do to avoid his attacks. But my sword was heavier and made from sterner stuff, so eventually I prevailed. I rushed him and slashed twice, ripping off his mummy wrappings. Underneath the mummy wrap, however, was not the rotting flesh of a mummy I suspected, but the biggest bishonen that I had ever seen. He was slim and young with delicate white hair, much like Elias, only much more pretty. “Well done,” he said, “I accept you as wielder of the sword. I give you my Domain, and I will live this life as a mortal from now on. But first... I assume you know how to write runes? Give this sword a new name.” And so, with my finger, I traced on the sword the runes « 佛指向月亮 » literally meaning Buddha Points To Moon. But this was too long a name, so I would later rename the sword as Eternal Moon.

As explained by others, all living things fall into Six Paths which they may be reborn as, under the cycle of samsara. But the depiction of this also shows pointing to the moon, that is, outside the six paths of of human existence, there is the power to remove one from the cycle. This sword could injure and drive back evil that couldn't be banished through means other than an Exorcism, and likewise, wielding it would make one eternal by removing them from time.

Zoe was released from her prison with a quick stroke from the sword. I suddenly understood exactly how to use this sword, and why it was necessary to have discipline. The godless have made a pact with death considering it their friend. A sword of the moon was a dangerous weapon to hold because of the nature of immortality and eternity, versus the nature of humanity. Immortality is only reasonable when one has conquered good/evil that is false perception, and the traps of the Six Paths of Desire Realm.

Zoe achieved divinity by letting go of her fear, and risking her life for my sake. And I achieved eternity only by becoming at peace with the idea of life with her. Without first cleansing their desires and fears, humans would quickly fall into despair and eternal life would be agony. This is why such a sword was so dangerous without a pure heart. Human beings must have purpose, or they always try to destroy themselves. I could be killed, but I would renew with the full moon. But the one thing that might sever my eternity was using the power of the moon to commit suicide. There would be no paradise for me, I would head straight into the path of Niraya if I used my eternal life that way.

As it was, I understood the importance of a neutral attitude. I was eternal now, and would see a great many things born or die around me, their lives but a mayfly. But I did

not have to spend this alone. In the mean time, I decided to deal with the curse I had acquired from that bottle. I tripped repeatedly, got pecked some more by angry birds, and even got caught in a mudslide. This was one thing that I wasn't going to deal with for eternity. I grabbed blank paper from my collection, and using my exorcist powers and my understanding of *o-mikuji*, I sucked the curse out of my body and wrote the following, «**Great Curse**. Terrible luck will befall you for all the days of your life. Your romances will fail, you will become accident-prone, and ravens will peck at you seeking to end your life. Nothing you do will be any good at this time» onto the paper.

This curse was tricky, and even burning or ripping the paper would release it back to me. But I knew how to deal with this. Using a bizarre pun from Japanese (the word "to wait" sounded like "pine tree"), I carefully folded the paper and pinned it to a nearby tree, letting it rest with that instead. I walked away from the swamp, and back to the forest, giving Zoe a small kiss on the cheek before we rejoined the others. We had gotten what we came for. It was time to face the Realm of Void.

CHAPTER 17

In which Nevras drags Ambrosia into the Realm of Void. Also, kinky sex.

NEVRAS

We had entered the Realm of Void again. Well, the first time for me, but anyway. And the others probably didn't remember. Ambrosia had a Transport Coin probably from the last time she did this. Using it, she brought Bahamut over here in a protective sphere, and we bypassed many of the difficult sections from before. Bahamut returned back to New Earth after the item's effect wore off, and it would probably take awhile to renew it. We were at the foothills of the Mountain of Fate.

It was my first time on the Mountain of Fate. Ambrosia had to climb this alone the last time, and I could tell it had messed with her last time from the vision that I had witnessed in Heaven. The Mountain of Fate was not actually that tall, although it was covered with winding paths and switchbacks, with a couple of areas that looked like they might crumble away entirely, given a few more years of weathering. Thankfully, we didn't have to do any real rock-climbing, because we had no equipment.

We managed to make it to the top with some difficulty. As before, the others promised to head down. It was said that whoever made it up there had to face their greatest fears, and most who made the attempt were driven insane. Ambrosia had managed to stay sane last time, but the fact that she had to do it all by herself had changed her. This wasn't happening this time. This time, I would be there.

No, I didn't see my evil self. Instead, I saw a vision, which I knew I would have to defeat, if I wished to be any help for Ambrosia. A mist came up around me. I did not see Ambrosia anymore, because I was inside the vision. It was likely this was a trial on the... I could not remember the mountain's name. And then, details about... that girl began to fade from my mind. Then the vision took over.

The room was well lit. I recognized it. I was inside Phoenix Castle. It was the day of my coronation. "Nevras, what are these?" Mother asked. She pointed out several pairs of stockings, some brassieres and panties, and a number of stylish dresses. She shook her head and scowled at me. "A king must be strong," she said, "you have no time for fantasies. Stop pretending to be something you're not! What you are doing is sick and wrong. It's time to put an end to your fantasies." And she pulled out a Fire Core. While flint and steel were the favored method of starting fires, in the relative absence of technology, aside from maybe using some kind of alchemy, fire elementals could be hunted for their hearts or Core. The Core of a fire elemental could be given simple commands like "burn" or "stop" and this is what she did. She laid all my secret clothes in a pile and commanded the Fire Core to burn them. The flames felt like they weren't burning just my clothes, but the dreamlike quality of this suddenly shifted things. There was fire all around me. Her words floated in the air in the absence of her body, "I need you to be strong. A king takes responsibility for what he wants and needs, and is expected to make the right decision." I felt as though I wasn't essential. I felt like I

wasn't worth my crown.

The vision repeated again, since I was unable to defeat it. And again. And again. I was stuck in an endless nightmare, becoming aware of what was happening only for a few brief seconds, and then my reality was replaced by the dream again.

AMBROSIA

I was on the Mountain of Fate again, but this time I was with Nevras, this time we were okay. Only, as I looked at him, he was obviously hallucinating. Strangely, right now, my evil self did not dare challenge me. "I want him to be alert and aware. I will not start your trial until his is done," Evil Ambrosia said. I asked her, "What, you want to see me suffer?!?" She frowned, "You're always misjudging me, Ambrosia. I am you, I want what you want. I am as attracted to him as you are. I'm the side of you that you're afraid of. You understand why." And suddenly, I too had a vision, only mine was a simple flashback.

My new adopted mom had just started raising me, and I was upset. I was crying. Sometimes I would throw things or act out. My new parents were not like Manna and God, they weren't simple folk living in the outskirts. Mom and my new mom had been classmates, this is how I managed to get adopted to these people.

Private education was basically all there was, since the Council didn't really do any public education. There were no teacher's unions, and no truancy laws, so many children went uneducated. Education often ran on barter system, with poor kids giving the school eggs or milk. In some cases, the parents worked part-time as janitors or cooks. People understood that education wasn't a given. Most people learned what they knew from being homeschooled. Others went to be apprenticed to a trade. Still others got educated by the nearby temples. If they had an excess of money and ambition to become someone of merit (such as a knight or court mage or a scholar), they were granted entry into the royal academy, provided their town had one.

Mom's parents lived in the church that she later inherited, and mined brimstone from the nearby quarry. Her mother's throat was messed up from exposure to the sulfur fumes and she talked in a raspy voice. They worked hard so that a penniless girl got the best education. Mom and my other mother were from completely different worlds. While Manna would understand that I was sad and angry from my mom leaving me at this strange woman's doorstep, my new mom was part of polite society. We had a reputation as the upper class to maintain. Those things were just not done, and it wasn't acceptable to just wear your heart on your sleeve. Why, you might lose face!

Suddenly it dawned on me. Why I was always so emotionally cold. Why I feared sex and intimacy. Why I didn't want to say what I meant or act out too much. "You're the part of me that I lost!" I said. She nodded, and started to approach me. This time, the merge felt different. I didn't want to smash things. In fact, my first impulse was to head straight to Nevras who was still trapped in some sort of scary hallucination, and hold him tight. Now, I wasn't sure that he could hear me, but I made sure to tell him, "Nevras, don't let the illusion win! I love you! You're worth it to me."

NEVRAS

The vision continued to repeat. I was trapped in the same sad scene over and over again, forced into a position I didn't want in the first place. And I forced to follow moral principles that seemed right, but were hurting my heart. I knew that crossdressing was weird and sick, I knew that I wasn't "really" a woman inside, that I was just doing something I wanted. I knew all of this, but somehow the thought of settling into this life made me incredibly depressed, and felt hopeless.

Victoria scolded me again. She burned my clothing again. I saw the fire all around me again. She told me again, "I need you to be strong. A king takes responsibility for what he wants and needs, and is expected to make the right decision." Only this time, things were different. Because this time, I heard another voice calling out to me. "*I love you,*" the voice said, "*You're worth it to me*." I didn't hear everything, but I could feel her love. Suddenly, the fire around me didn't feel real. I thought of what my mother said. Although she kept accusing me of wrongdoing, she also kept telling me to be strong and to take responsibility for my decisions. Before, it would seem that she meant I

should put aside my desires and become a king. But now I thought about it. Would a king who always did what he was told be considered a strong king? I mean, if I didn't decide who I was in personal matters, what would stop some random lord from controlling my policy? Sure, what I did might indeed be wrong. But there were people who believed in me. The flames had disappeared, and then I saw my mom looking puzzled as the illusion began to fall apart. “You're not my mother,” I declared, “my real mother is tough but she would never stomp all over my desires just to fulfill some duty! Who are you?”

It was then I woke from my dream. I was being held tight in an embrace. Ambrosia, deadpan cold Ambrosia looked at me with love in her eyes. “I have to change something in my life,” said I, “I may be wrong, but this is what I want. I have been a crossdresser and I'm tired of hiding this from other people. It's time for me to be open about myself.”

AMBROSIA

I must have looked puzzled. “What do you mean? I know about this side of you. So do Elias and Aqorm, from when we were in Shoten.” He shook his head, “There's a difference between having a fetish of some sort, and coming to terms with it. I need to be strong, and if I want or need something, I need to take responsibility. That means, if I'm a crossdresser, I either need to give it up or come out to the people I know and bear any scorn they might give me.” He left for a few minutes, and when he came back, he had changed. His hair was neatly combed and styled, his face was made up, he wore breast forms, the Peach Dress I had given him, heels, stockings, and women's underwear. He was gorgeous. I told him an excuse, “You know, Belial might kill us all when we meet him. So I think maybe we should ummm...” Actually, though, I just wanted to get into his panties. “You mean you want to...” he stopped as my intention dawned on him, “okay. I'm fine with that.” He tried to fumble with the back zipper of his dress, yet the zipper kept flopping. I stopped him, “I love you. Like this, too. Don't bother with changing.”

Nevras wasn't just feminine in his dress, it was a side of his personality that he kept hidden. He was actually kinda shy and passive. It is not to say that these traits are wholly feminine, but rather as a person he was indecisive and trusted the opinions of others. He preferred following the rules of other people, some of them long dead. But the way he acted, he was not one to take initiative, he typically preferred to follow than lead. I had doubts of his future as a ruler, but I kept them to myself. He was becoming more willing to make his own decisions, as I saw today. Even so, he preferred to have someone else lead. I was happy to oblige, for I was a natural leader. I think.

I started kissing him, my lips raw force against his tender mouth. I pulled him close with my right hand, and with my left hand I pulled down his black stockings and then his panties. He had tucked his crotch neatly, pulling his balls into a cavity just below his stomach as any real crossdresser knows to do, letting him conceal his penis and balls. From a standing position, once the panties no longer held everything in place and his legs opened, the testicles dropped back down and the penis rose. And rose. I pushed him over, using my strength and my skill from all my training. It seems like I was rough, but I did know what I was doing, so he managed to hit the ground of this mountain without, you know, splitting open his skull. I jumped on the ground with him, the view of the mountain all around me. From here, you could see the foothills and beyond to the Void Wastes, when the bright scenic view faded into dull grey. And yet, I wasn't at all concerned with that view. I had something better right here.

Pulling my own panties off, Nevras helped me unzip my dress. I sat up for a second and let it flop off, then reaching back and also pulled off my gray sports bra. It had traveled through Hell with me, so I was sure to wear it with me here. As we kissed passionately, I ordered him, “Suck my breasts.” Nevras, eager to assert his independence declared, “I don't have to do what you say...” I was actually pleased he was speaking his mind for a change. But since I did want my breasts suckled, and I had to make him think I was displeased with him for now, I gave him my best “Slave, who told you that you could question me” look. He backpedaled, “But come to think of it, I kind of want to suck your breasts too. You see, I made that decision on my own.” Pfffft. I could tell who still wore the pants in this relationship.

I unbuttoned the chest of his dress, while he suckled on my breasts. I gave him more commands, like rub my back, touch my feet, or reach his fingers inside of me. No, I'm not a sadist. He didn't have to do any of these things, but I wanted to try to teach him the difference between following orders blindly, and wanting to do something because you also were happy doing it. He wisely refused to lick my boots or my ass. Neither of us wanted those things anyway. He instead massaged my back and my feet, which apparently made me moan in a sexy way, because he was all too willing after that.

While he was touching me down there, I started sucking on his fake breasts. The New Earth is not advanced in most technology, but is very advanced in the field of chemistry through alchemy. Unlike silicon of the original Earth though, it was refined to look and feel like real breasts without tearing or leaking. It was reinforced with runes to bounce the same way, feel the same way, and stay on with no support. The problem, however, was that it still kinda tasted like silicone. Blehhh. I stopped sucking, and decided to suck on something else to clear my palate. I kissed Nevras then, then moved close and whispered in his ear. "Come inside me *now*," I ordered Nevras, with my evil self in my voice as we were both in agreement, "I want your child." This time, he obeyed without question.

His manhood (womanhood?) was erect as he lay on the mountain hill. I opened my legs and thrust inside of him, and moved myself in and out in a fast rhythm being just gentle enough to not break his pelvis. What? I like sex a bit rough. Fifteen minutes turned into an hour, and it was the most pleasurable sex I ever had or probably was to have. He was a gentleman, he kept me satisfied for all that time, and I succeeded in my plan to have children. I honestly can't get into much detail, as there isn't much to it. I have no technique at all, so I basically hammered at him for a straight hour. If we were ever married, surely later I might learn to improve my technique, but for now I can say that he enjoyed it, for he stayed with me for the rest of our journey to stop Belial. At least, I **hoped** he enjoyed it, it did look like he was walking funny. After that, we sat and watched the sunrise. Before it got eaten up by the Void again.

NEVRAS

Actually, it was extraordinarily uncomfortable. But I loved *her*, not the sex. We put back our clothes on, and I walked down from the mountain fully prepared to endure odd looks for my decision to live a portion of my life as a crossdresser. Actually, as it went down, Michael somehow already knew ("God sees everything," he said), Elias and Aqorm didn't really need to adjust because they'd already seen me like that, Lilith was a demon and that apparently made her immoral, Azrael was more traditional but usually deferred to Zoe, and Zoe was completely cool with it. In fact, the only remark anyone made went along these lines: Aqorm told me, "You're walking bow-legged. A lady walks like this. Or maybe this." She demonstrated both a prim and proper way to walk, and a more sexy walk with my hips swinging. I told her, "I can't do that." She continued her questioning, "Why? I can teach you." I explained that it's not that I couldn't learn, but that I couldn't do it right *now*. The line or questioning continued back and forth until I blurted out that Ambrosia and I had just had sex, and my pelvis was hurting. Ambrosia, Aqorm, and I blushed from embarrassment.

We walked in silence back through the Void Wastes. The Void no longer affected us, since the power of the Tao was passively shielding us. After a bit, Ambrosia muttered to me, "Why didn't you tell me that you didn't like how that felt? I would have held back if I'd known." I told her, "I **did** like it. It's just, I'm gonna be walking funny for a couple of days. It's the roughest sex I've had like, ever, but I like rough women. Let's just try to do this on a mattress or something next time. Between you and the rocks and stuff, my body is sore."

Ambrosia, being the natural leader and such, suggested, "So, last time we didn't really get to visit all the towns here, and I can't help feeling like we missed some crucial things. We should look around, and find out what we can here. Also, that tower over there is the Tower of Sorrow. Zoe, we should go there and have you master your ultimate weapon." Everyone looked at her blankly. She corrected herself, "I mean, it feels like I've been here before. In a dream! Yeah, that's it." I'm not great at body language, but I feel like nobody believed her.

CHAPTER 18

In which cute Grey Wolves are hunted in order to use a sword.

AMBROSIA

We emerged from the Mountain of Fate, and immediately began to hunt Grey Wolves. Physical attacks didn't work on them, and the air of the Realm of Void mostly soaked up the magic we used against them. What we cast was so dispersed that their tough skin and fur soaked it up. It might as well have tickled them. Yazim Jianne muttered some gibberish words under his breath, and tossed a big ball of emptiness at the one we fought. I fully expected it to do absolutely nothing as well, but to my surprise, the creature groaned in pain. "What did you do to it?" I asked. He explained, "The Void soaks up all energy and most matter that is not Void itself. The creatures who have survived here, have adapted to low amounts of Void, allowing them to spend prolonged time there. But a focused attack works against them." Seeing the confusion on my face, he simplified, "Think of it like a plant absorbing moisture from the air getting hit by a water cannon. Or a lizard adapting to the desert, but getting burned by a flamethrower. It's too much at once." Azrael helped with some spells that also created Void, and her new sword Eternal Moon finished the job. Nevras helped us as well, although his sword wasn't designed to cut these creatures, he had the Void Slice, which he used to great effect against these Grey Wolves. I was suddenly glad he was here.

As for me, I helped not at all. My thoughts went back my first dog, a cute lil' puppy named Scratch, who was named this from his habit of scratching... nevermind. I did not see Scratch's animal soul when we visited Heaven unlike Miss Kitty, not that I expected to. Scratch was a holy terror. Now, he didn't start out this way. But he was one of these dogs that we saw looked cute and said, "I'll take good care of him, I promise!" Yeah, right. Between my schooling and my parent's work, we neglected the dog except to feed, and kept him chained up. The dog started to break free from his chains, and since we couldn't be there to watch him all the time, we had to give him bigger chains. As he grew, he got stronger and stronger, in one case pulling the post we tied him with along behind the chain. The dog began to run with the wild dogs, and picked up a bad attitude, helped along by his constant abandonment. Eventually, he bit a neighbor, and we had to give him away. As much as I knew these Grey Wolves were probably never children and as much as I could tell these things were as big as a house, with solid muscle and jaws that could take off my head, I couldn't get past the image of the dog we had. Let's ignore the fact that I had already faced the wolf Fenrir in battle, this is completely not relevant.

We finished off about seven of these in groups of one or two, when a pack of them caught wind of us and attacked. Now, not all of us even had effective weapons against such creatures. Aqorm and Elias basically had to stay out of the fight despite having ultimate weapons because of the freakish toughness of these things. The same was true of Zoe to a large extent, though if push came to shove, she could probably use her Sage ability to at least fend them off. Lilith on the other hand, took pleasure in using her blade to carve up two of these things. Azrael and Yazim Jianne each took on one, and Nevras got a fifth. But one slipped past, so I turned around and found myself face to face with this wolf which was probably the size of a bear. It panted slightly and drooled, then slowly approached me. I froze in a strange mix of fear and sentiment, not really knowing what to do. The wolf pounced, and I dodged to the right. It moved its front feet and shoulders, turning itself to the side. I panicked, and stabbed it with my knife a few times. The beastie writhed and screamed, and then crumpled in a heap.

I cried, and was strongly tempted to dig it a grave, until the others cut it open and removed its Heart. In front of me. Once we had 13 Hearts, we returned to the Tower of Sorrow. "Very good," said the people there. They said that they would now perform the ritual to unlock the Sword of Sorrow from its bindings.

ZOE

They showed us how to feed these Hearts to the Sword of Sorrow. You see, the Sword of Sorrow was a katana with a sheath, and a large chain attached to its handle. At the end of the chain was a metallic broken heart, and the chain was coiled around the

Sword several times so that it could not come unsheathed. The leaders of the tower fed the Sword some Hearts, and gradually the chains loosened. At long last, the chain uncoiled, and began to glow at a regular rhythm like a heartbeat. I touched the Sword, and it responded to my touch. I could feel its sorrow with my own hands.

The Sword of Sorrow had many powers. Those slashed by it would die. But the sword could also bring the dead back to life. The sheath could create a protective barrier, and the chain could restrain people. I was happy with this weapon, but I feared I would later regret having to use it. Azrael saw the doubt on my face, and gave me a hug to cheer me up.

CHAPTER 19

In which the towns of the Realm of Void are actually explored. Unlike last time.

AMBROSIA

Now, I could have rushed straight to Belial's Castle like before, but there was still a sort of leftover desire to goof off and spend time with Nevras. I also vaguely remembered Belial being kind of invincible. Having read some crappy novels, like one about some guy who killed people and split his soul seven times in order to make himself mostly immortal, I wondered if there might not also be a secret to this demon's strength. We would need a good library or something, I decided, so we elected to explore these towns a bit more. After all, we had skipped them last time and things went badly.

Bahamut was currently unable to be summoned, as the Transport Coin took a lot of energy to summon living things. As such, we instead summoned our ship into the waters of this dimension. My Tao ability protected us, and the ship was protected by the Transport Coin, so for the first time since we had been here, we had the opportunity to sit outside on the decks and watch the ocean. To be honest though, it was rather lacking. The Realm of Void had sun that only occasionally appeared since stuff kept getting eaten by the Void and renewing, and the same for the wind. So there was no wind in my hair that I loved so much, and the sky around us was a depressing grey. Not gray like an overcast day, grey like the absence of anything cheerful in the universe. There was no color at all around us, almost like we all had... Elias says this type of colorblindness is called achromatopsia. But I knew that wasn't the case, because the ship and ourselves were in full color. It should have been interesting to see a grey sky and sea, but it definitely wasn't. After about an hour or so, most of us went below deck, except for Yazim Jianne, who decided to steer. We piloted the ship in two-hour shifts.

The journey took a few days. We slept, we ate, we paced around, and occasionally we talked about what were gonna do after things ended, assuming we all survived. I knew Lilith wanted to work in a restaurant, but it sounded like she'd managed to find a spot in Aiken Monastery. Aqorm had already become an accomplished musician so it was no surprise that she wanted to do that, though she said she might do more than just that. Apparently, this journey had given her confidence, and she talked about working at a nightclub. Elias wasn't joining her, it turned out, his dream seemed to be to become some sort of researcher and/or work at a library. Michael didn't have any firm plans, mentioning that his duties in Heaven usually kept him busy enough that he didn't typically have too many hobbies. I may have just imagined it, but he seemed to be rubbing his stomach a lot. Azrael and Zoe said at around the same time that they would probably travel together, before blushing that they both had the same idea. Those two were weird. Selqui said that she'd probably join Yazim Jianne in his experiments. Since he was above deck, we never found out what those were, but we were probably better off not knowing. His experiments tended toward the depraved, the kinky, or both at once.

We docked on an island in the outskirts of one of the towns. None of the towns of the Realm of Void had ports, since they were simply too hard to maintain, and once people lost faith in the durability of their towns, everything would fall apart. The map had somehow transposed this town of Futanari with the Tower of Sorrow. But I'd seen this sort of thing happen before. Powerful wonder-workers sometimes moved entire towns, for various reasons. Sometimes they wanted to be near a landmark, sometimes they just

were tired of where they were. Rather than try to levitate the whole town, and have some people fall to their doom, what usually wound up happening was they'd simply swap one location with another. Galaxia and Kushiyama used to be in different places too. Of course, this was hell for map makers, because even with runes updating stuff, the runes used to display the map had been fixed in place. Short of redrawing the map by hand, there wasn't much they could do. I was pretty sure this was Futanari though, the sign said so, and that really helped. Well, unless vandals has changed the sign too...

At first glance, this town seemed to be all women. But even I knew this couldn't be the case from basic biology in school. They taught us there are two major sexes (aside from intersex conditions). We learned that gender was mostly a mental construct, and there were not 72 genders. Most people didn't have time to fuck around with 21st century gender theories, being able to magically change sex. If they didn't want to be male, they weren't angsting about being a female in a man's body or protesting the injustice of it all, they paid a wizard and suddenly they were able to bear children and weren't able to write their name in the snow. That was it. In all of what I learned in school, they impressed upon me that under normal circumstances, two males or two females could not produce a child. So how had this village survived?

ELIAS

Over the course of my studies, I read about how during the later period of Earth's old history one town had experimented with genes. They wound up creating bees that were resistant to cold, mold, and moisture, allowing them to gather honey when humans weren't mowing lawns. There were also slimes that burbled quietly. There was even talk of them creating a separate race of humans by isolating certain genes. Somehow, this all seemed very familiar...

In any case the town seemed normal enough except for its disproportionate amount of females. My eyes were getting used to color again, so I could not examine more closely. The Void had very little of what we know of as magic, it was a bit like the old Earth, having some faith abilities but the average person couldn't use so much as a Fire spell. And neither could we, not visibly. Oh sure, we could increase the heat of something already burning, or make the air slightly warmer or colder but visible magic was something that only worked away from other people, and the Void ate a large portion of it outside the towns. What they did have was technology, and the power of existence. By gathering together as a community, somehow the town kept from ripping apart and turning to nothing. This power of existence kept the town in color... at least in the center. Towns typically couldn't have major ports in the Realm of Void since at the edges population was less dense, and the creeping nothing of the Void would decay matter. And soon, this panic would undermine the existence of the entire town. This was a lower technology town than some, on account of being a farming town. Despite this, a giant golem of a sort I had never seen (I suspected they were what was known from records as robots) picked the tomatoes and parsnips, creepy bees of the sort you would see from the movie *The Swarm* pollinated the crops, and large combines using energy to move without any smoke harvested the wheat and rice. The town seemed to be sustaining itself, somehow or other. We decided to talk to the people to find out how they managed.

“Ummmm,” I talked to one of the women as she passed by, “we're new to this town.” She looked at me, then at the rest of us, “I imagine you are. Well I'm sorry, but without significant adjustments, I'm afraid none of you can be permanent residents.” She wore a green tunic and a matching skirt with black stockings, and a pair of green open-toed heels. Her red hair was tightly bound in a ponytail. All of the girls here were beautiful women, but there was something odd about them. But then, I'd already pieced this together just from the town name and my knowledge of history. I kept the information to myself. Instead, I said, “No, we don't want to be residents, we want to know more about this town.” She nodded in understanding, “Sure thing! I'm a postal worker, so I'll take you on a tour as I finish my route,” she pointed briefly to the badge on her chest. The logo had an African swallow delivering a coconut in its beak and the familiar Latin words «*Tabellarius Caenum Sunt* » emblazoned at the bottom. I watched as the other members of my group figured things out about the town with some amusement.

Nevras seemed to notice right away. Next were Aqorm and Lilith, who seemed to notice when she passed near us, despite having a very floral scent to her, there were woody musky undertones to her scent, and her voice seemed odd for such a petite body. Michael was uninterested in the affairs of regular people, and barely a member of our group lately, having secrets of his own. Our tour guide/postal worker picked up a large stack of boxes and shoved them on the three-wheeled cart which she started peddling with her feet, alerting Azrael that she was abnormally strong to be holding this stack with one hand and the bike with the other. Zoe noticed something amiss as the girl sat on the cart facing her. They started mumbling to each other, as the postwoman said, “On your right is the post office. Over here, is the public library. And this is the bar where we hang out and have fun.” Yazim Jianne and Selqui seemed to be ignoring the tour guide entirely, and had wandered off to instead talk to some sort of researcher. From the looks of it, they were fascinated with much of the research the town was interested in. I don't need to spell out that he also knew about this town by reputation. As for Ambrosia? She didn't figure it out from any of the oddities of this woman, not from its history, not even by piecing together that a town like this would have to depend entirely on tourists or have another means of keeping itself alive. In fact, it took her walking in on them in the public bath to finally say, “Heaven and Earth. This town. They're all...”

AMBROSIA

I'm not sure I want to see that again.

Anyway, we visited a ton of the places that postal person pointed out. Lilith went straight to the bar, while Elias headed to the library. I had been interested in how farming worked, having never been at all good at it. In the New Earth, all people (except me) could grow stuff instantly with little effort. But I couldn't do that. So I asked them for technical advice. The problem was, I lived in a world where roughly thirty centuries had gone on with only thaumaturgy and alchemy, so I had no idea what silicate-based colloidal hydroponics were. The farmer sensed my confusion and gave me a bunch of bags of seeds. “Here,” they said, “these seeds will grow in any soil, and so will their seeds.” I took a look, and they were covered with some sort of gel. She showed me how to do basic farming using a shovel and hoe, and was impressed with the fishing pole I had that turned into a farming tool. Apparently they had never seen things work like that.

Elias exited the library later that night, deeply disturbed. Whatever he had just read had shocked him beyond belief. He was even crying.

ELIAS

When I visited the library, I had originally intended to do some light reading. You know, reading a 6000 page report on the history of alchemy, followed by an equally short discussion on the spread of magic from ancient Mesopotamia into China and Europe. While these were interesting books, somehow I got sucked into the 28 volume history of Earth. As I understood it, a large amount of matter was pulled when the Earth split into the Realm of Void and the New Earth, so in some cases sections of libraries got split between the two of them. I recognized this library from a set of missing shelves in Kushiyama. The number of books, the subject matter, even the size of the books, everything was the missing material.

I was a fast reader, but the further back I got, the more concerned I got. Everything I knew of history was wrong. Aliens, suppressed history, evil organizations running things from behind the scenes, this wasn't history written by the losers or the winners, this was history written by someone who had lived through it, and seen everything. The author in the copyright page was listed as Archangel Estheriel.

Worse than that, given that this book contained uninterrupted history of the Earth until it became the Realm of Void (after that, history essentially stopped) as written by someone who saw everything, there were parts of the past that simply didn't add up.

Besides the fact that the history books had all taught us that the UN and EU were protectors of peace in the world, that aliens never existed, and that these ancient cultures had built their architecture much later than I'd read here, there were things in this history that simply didn't make sense. What exactly happened before God created Light? And most importantly, with all of these miracles and strange events, why did I get a growing

sense of dread? An idea struck me. If things like the pyramids could be much older than I thought, and the books I read could barely scratch the surface of known history, could not the reverse be true? What if history was far less than what had been planted in books and movies and the like, and all we knew actually only existed a few years ago, made up on the spot by someone's fertile imagination. What if everything was a lie?

Aqorm had watched a show with me called *Big O*, in an attempt to get me to understand pop culture aside from just books. I hadn't really liked the story, but now I understood why. It was set in a city where people had no recollection of events before 40 years. It turned out that in fact there was a good reason for this. I stopped reading entirely, not liking where this train of thought was heading.

Despite there being plenty of reference books I had yet to read, I was taking a break for a bit. When first light came, I arose and urged the rest to leave this village. The women wanted to see us off, but I'd had enough. Maybe the next town would be better.

AMBROSIA

Elias was wrong, the next two towns were even worse. After we left Futanari, we headed straight south to an island roughly shaped like a fish. There, we found the city known as Hotaru. It was a metal city unlike any I had seen in the New Earth. There were buildings that seemed tall enough to touch the sky made from glass and some type of steel. There were portals allowing movement from one part of town to another, all kinds of technological conveniences, and holograms so you could talk to people from long ago. There were machines that fabricated food from organic compounds, much like the one in the hotel awhile back. And yet, I hated it. I mean, I really hated it with a passion.

Let me explain. There were no actual people here. We talked to the holograms, including a writer named Raymond Chandler. He was about to tell us some writing technique when all of a sudden a man came through the door with a gun and sprayed bullets around. The next second, ninjas also dropped from the ceiling and the two started fighting. It turned out later these were holograms, as real ninjas and gunman couldn't exist in this town of pollution. I never got to ask Chandler what his method was...

And so it was that Momo's head was severed from her neck, and she lay in a pool of her own blood. That's what you get for messing with the true heroes of the story. Hmmm, right, I skipped a bit ahead. Sorry, I don't know what came over me.

It's like this. The air in Hotaru was filled with a thick green gas, and I was fairly sure that long ago something had happened to kill everyone off. We explored abandoned hospitals, patching up wounds we had from earlier battles with the Grey Wolves and treating previous poisons with the medicine that was in our packs. We discovered an old library with some sort of disc player and loads of discs, and I pulled out one called *Ice Castles*, and watched a scene where a blind girl did figure skating and did well until finally they threw flowers on the skating rink; her boyfriend screamed but it was too late and she tripped, so there was this scene were everyone gasped, then they all started clapping louder before they played the credits music. We even bought things from the vendor grocery shops, talking to long-dead merchants and haggling prices. It was almost like a real shop. We decided to move along. We had to find out how things got this bad.

I'm gonna skip ahead to when we were in Momiji. I'll probably skip back too. Confusing, yes, I know. But I'm explaining my story after all, and trying to relate how the physical state of Hotaru matched to pollution and the unrest inside my heart. *We had to find out how things got this bad*, I had said after all.

The island of Momiji to the east was ummmm different from the other two. It was a mountain town were we were asked for papers immediately when we entered. “Papers please,” repeated the guards. I handed out the Passports we had for wandering the New Earth. They shook their heads, “Not valid!” I gasped, “But this is what I have!” He shook his head, “Proof of Residence, Void Pass, Ghoul Token, Janitor's License, or Disease Card.” I protested, “But I don't have any of those! Just let me in town.” They shook their heads like obstructive jerks everywhere and then explained, “All new entrants to this town must be citizens. Anyone not having proof of that... Will have to be arrested.”

I squinted my eyes in confusion, and was about to laugh when I realized they weren't joking. I protested, “That's crazy! How does one even become a citizen if they're stopped

at the gate? Forget this, I'm heading in!" I punched one of the police, knocking them over, and then stepped through. At this, one of the others blew a loud whistle, and informed me, "Assaulting a police officer! That's punishable by death!" They chased after me, and I could hear them coordinating with each other using something similar to my cellphone. It was bigger and clunkier though, and it seemed to not use runes.

There was a temple just ahead, but we didn't want to crash into it, so I made a sharp right turn. Some of the others scattered. The men and women in blue outfits were a threat to us as our magic was very weak within the Realm of Void, so despite Zoe and Elias having powerful magic, they had to run like I did. Only Nevras and the others with weapon training dared to fight them, slashing them with swords. The police had no armor and slumped to the ground. It looked like Nevras had only wounded them, but that one wasn't getting up any time soon. The nearby copper brandished her weapon and said, "Freeze or I'll shoot!" Nevras had heard about guns, and since they had already said they'd kill us if they caught us, decided the only thing to do was run. He ran past the nearest building, heels clicking as he ran in the dress and stockings. Nevras had decided to be more honest about what he wanted recently, so he no longer wore his distinctive blue armor. Well, not as much anyway. But it might have helped here. The second didn't miss, because after all we weren't superhuman, and can't dodge bullets. Nevras wobbled, then fell over. "**Nevras!**" I screamed. As I breathed, my lungs filled with tension.

I was about to rush back to him, when I noticed the long arm of the law (so to speak) had caught up to me. They tried to shoot at me, but the same ability that I had to go with the flow and sidestep gave me a sort of dumb luck as I tried to move away from them. I seemed to step just as they tried to fire, or I'd trip, or move a leg or arm just at the right time. Finally, they shrugged and tossed away their weapons and came after me with batons. Michael gave Nevras a healing touch, and grasped his stomach. Unlike all the humans our group, Michael was able to heal normally and his aura warded off shots.

The local constabulary had no idea what to do with an actual angel, so some of them kneeled. "Stop that," he said. In the next few minutes, they had gone from kneeling to running however, as Lilith popped out of nowhere. Like Michael, they had no idea how to hurt her, but her glowing eyes and fearsome appearance freaked them out. "Demon!" they shouted. Even though Lilith was an attractive woman, her wings and horns and tail gave her away. She kinda ripped them all to shreds, or breathed Hellfire on them, or stabbed them with her tail or horns. Lilith could be kinda intense.

Meanwhile, I still dealing with two or three of them swinging their batons at me, and I kept ducking or dodging them until finally, I called out, "Look behind you, there's a giant Ghobli hare!" All of them turned around to look. "Where?!?" they asked, before asking, "Wait, what is a Ghobli hare?" I had gained quite a bit of speed. I saw the rest of my group follow after me, passing by the police who had noticed the carnage from before. We were relatively unmolested from then on, but some of the cops tried to band together to form blockades or herd us into traps. I know it seems like I hate cops from all of the police that I attacked here, but I knew they were just doing their job. It was the town that was insane. We tried not to seriously hurt any of them, but we needed to escape.

The entire town was a lot of small houses on the side of a mountain with a massive network of rope bridges. We climbed up one section, crossed bridge east, climbed another, crossed north, then climbed and crossed south. We were about 100 ft off the ground now. We stepped off the planks of the rope bridge and on to the solid rock of a nearby ledge. To the right of us was a building with a sign that said, «Momiji Town Police.» It was well barricaded, but Lilith and Michael working together managed to slice the door off its hinges. The police officers stood in shock. It was time to complain to the police chief about how things were in this town. "Stop in the name of the law!" said several police as they tried to tackle me, but I remembered that I had a Crest from Michael to absorb damage and use it as a weapon. I was fine, but the police collapsed from their wounds. They hadn't even any last words before dying.

I approached the police chief, hoping to find some answers on the town's screwy immigration policies, but the chief turned out to be a *Breath of Fire* villain, and transformed into a horrible creature. Its mouth was roughly the size of my entire body, its body was long and curved like a serpent with segments that resembled vague skeletal bits

and pieces. Oh yeah, and it had claws too. Lilith blasted it with Hellfire and Zoe hit it with Druidfire, which together should have easily obliterated anything in its path. The strange and scary creature was still standing though, and the room was untouched by all that energy. Azrael stared, “Nine Dragons Flesh Refinement! I never dreamed it was possible!” Elias too, had apparently heard of it, “Really, that technique? I'd always assumed that was a myth of some sort. It really is a true cultivation method?” Exasperated, I finally told those two, “Quit being vague and tell us what it is!” They explained, filling in each other's sentences, “Legends tell of an ancient fighting style, I guess you'd call it, where the practitioner was able to absorb the actual damage of attacks into their body, becoming stronger and stronger.” I wondered how that was any different from Michael’s Oracle ability, but they explained that this assumption was wrong. They continued, “But because of the completely frightening power of this technique and because those who used it tended to become horrible fiends, the method to this was destroyed everywhere that it could be read about. And no, the counter to this form isn't known.” Thinking for a second, I said, “What if we tried to overfill it?” In many instances, this sort of thing would probably work, but it just kept absorbing damage without healing its wounds. Well, it didn't really wear away either, instead the damage mangled its body, and it covered the wounds over with blackened and cancerous looking skin and distorted bones. Azrael and Elias tried holy prayers and symbols against it, Zoe and Nevras hit it with magic and physical force, Lilith and Michael tore at it with their weapons, and so on, but it kept eating up the damage and distorting its body while it gained strength. Yeah, I know earlier I said that magic was ineffective here, but unbelief can waver, and these people had just seen an angel and a demon, as well as a door getting knocked off its hinges, and someone turn into a freakish creature. Little by little, this area was granting us access to magic. Yet it was quickly proving ineffective.

Most of the wonder-workers were running out of mystic power, and those like Nevras were exhausted. And yet here it stood, stronger than ever. I could think of only one attack powerful enough to fight him, and the last time I had lost control of myself using it. I was going to try to use the Resonance of the Tao to turn his own power against him, but I knew that the slightest mistake might be devastating. It felt vaguely like that scene from *The Last Airbender* (the good one), where that bald kid tried to take away the guy’s energy and some voiceover told him, “To bend another's energy, your own spirit must be unbendable.” Only I wasn’t trying to take his power away, so much as pull what he had collected, and use it against him. Such was the swirling rhythm of the Tao.

I spun the Tao, watching the great demonic critter try to suck away the energy that touched its body. Yet the Tao spun back from it, depriving it of its prize, and pulling what it had drained over the years with it. Like a violent storm, my power ripped through him, stripping him over and over again of what he'd stolen, while the other end of the attack ripped at his body. I had tried to control the Tao in times before, but here I was simply letting it do its own thing. In the end, a simple man sat on the ground, begging us to attack him, to put him out of his misery. Elias and Azrael shook their heads. Not only would it be bad mercy, but it might make him strong again. With any source of aggression directed towards him, this guy simply crumbled to ash.

With his death, a weird circle appeared on the ground before shattering apart. “A Tether?” asked Azrael. When I asked her what she meant, she explained that one of the methods of immortality was to store one's essence in a body, or an object, or another living thing. I thought of how difficult Belial was to kill, and I decided that you never could be too careful. Contrary to popular belief, the way to split your soul was not through murder. That was completely stupid, and anyone who believed that is stupid too. Murder taints the soul, it doesn't split it. You split your soul by creating artwork or music, by cooking, and by making a strong impression on another person. The act of splitting the soul is not an evil one, but rather something that happens naturally as we find people and things we love. A Tether is simply the logical extension of that idea, where such things become a safeguard against death, such as writing a book to try to immortalize your thoughts. It is a bit sketchy, but still not exactly evil.

I might have possibly also become a bit paranoid and unhinged for constantly being chased and persecuted for just trying to have a normal life inside a town, because now I

saw enemies everywhere. So when I saw a cult set up in one of the temples of Momiji filled with those who worshiped a Heavenly Immortal Maple Tree that they claimed could heal wounds, I became so paranoid that I decided to cut it down and burn it. The cultists tried to stop me, but I fought back and defeated all of them. The others of my group were shocked at my resolve, but eventually decided that they believed in my cause, so I must know what I'm doing. Tired from basically everyone attacking me in this town, deeply disturbed at what I had wound up doing, and stressed in general, I decided to head to the local pub to calm down and get some perspective. No sooner did I do so, however, than our group wound up being approached by another one. A white haired young man with spiky hair and an enormous sword looked our group up and down, and shook his head, "What? You also are questing to fight against the dread demon Belial? Take a look at my party of heroes. All of them are so capable on their own, but together, we can fight off any foe. You have no chance!" He pointed to a petite woman with a white blouse and blue pleated skirt named Momo (the party healer), an elf with blue hair named Aster, a wizard named Gumi, and an impossibly big man called Na'ud. More like party of assholes. Without exception, all of his subordinates pestered us until we fought back, picking what we were most sensitive about. Gumi scoffed at our magic users, saying, "You should be afraid of my powers. I mean, aren't you?" But a simple demonstration of our thaumaturgy made him run off. Aster provoked Aqorm next, "Bah. Your party doesn't stand a chance. You don't even have a proper elf with you, like me." He continued, "See how young my face looks? I'm already over 10000. By the time you beat someone like Belial you'll be *old*." Aqorm was now a proper elf, but her mixed breed created the impression that she was mortal. It didn't matter soon, as she soon proved she was the better one, when she jabbed the other elf with swift punches in the stomach until he went down. Na'ud saw Lilith, who to all appearances was a grown women but didn't look especially muscular and offered, "Na'ud like to smash. Give me something to smash, little girl?" Lilith said, "Bah, you're not so tough," and punched the wall in several places, removing a small boulder of rock, lifted in one hand, and then whacked Na'ud repeatedly with it until it broke. "Na'ud hurting inside," he said.

Lastly, Momo hadn't learned a thing from all of these other defeated, or maybe she just had a death wish, because she came to mess with me, even though I was a head taller, outweighed her by about thirty pounds between cup size, hips, and ummm posterior. Besides which, I was generally prettier than that ugly hag. Okay, that last one's a lie. She gave me grief about our band of misfits, she called Nevras a tomgirl, and told us that we were doomed. Looking at this woman who seemed to have been eye candy for this white-haired Akira Toriyama reject, and watching how she behaved so aggressively, I called her out. I said, "You're a disgrace to women everywhere. Far from being competent, you're just decoration." She gave back some fresh language of her own, "The one who is a disgrace is you. You've lost your feminine ways, and become a man. No wonder your party is so odd, with you as leader." Be right back, guys. I have a murder to perform.

Back in Hotaru, we ascended what looked to be the biggest of these towers, and found ourselves dealing with security systems. Lasers that blinked in sequence hit us with photons hard enough to push us back and give us slight burns, so Elias carefully studied the pattern, and made it to a power switch to turn the thing off. Other rooms were guarded by whirring saws, robots, and spikes from the walls or ceiling were all things were had to get past and disarm while reaching the top. At the peak, there was a large computer console, which Elias typed in, «**[Search:]** History of Hotaru's Decline.» Another hologram appeared, and said to us, "Come no closer, for this area is dangerous. The particle inducers will disintegrate your physical form. We will speak here." I asked, "Maybe you can tell me... Everyone here seems to be either dead or a hologram." But the hologram seemed to be totally deaf to me. Elias typed my question. The hologram was of an older woman, with clothing vaguely like a toga, some goggles, and pants held up by far more belts than was necessary. I suppose in the future, people are supposed to wear tasteless and impractical clothes but now that the future was technically the past, I could mock it as much as I wanted. She explained, "Ah yes. Well, you came to the right place. I am called the Keeper, for I keep this history. Long ago, our land was like yours, full of plants and animals. We loved these, but we wanted an easy life, so we built various

machines to help things get done for us. But... technology has a way of creeping up on you. We began to need greater resources, and the plants and animals started to die off. But, of course, at the time we were so busy crafting a life of leisure for ourselves that we couldn't be bothered with lesser beings. In our pursuit of free time, mechanical energy wasn't enough, so we turned to coal and various gases. In time, the air became filled with a dark smoke, and breathing was restrained. Even the sun was blotted out. Desperate to clean this mess up, we turned to another source of energy, that of uranium. One accident was all it took. I left this record behind for future generations. Don't repeat my mistake." She led us to two storage chests, one of which contained a medicine to treat the radiation poisoning we would pick up walking through town. The other one has a type of seed. She explained that this was a Cleansing Tree, and she wanted this to be planted in town near the water. We stuck around just long enough to plant the tree and watched the murky air become slightly thinner and less green before we left. Things were looking up.

Back in Momiji, I had just killed a girl for nothing more than insulting me. I could claim that it was because I had been persecuted or made to feel unwelcome, but this is what terrorists in the 20th century said. This is probably what Belial told himself. I knew the real reason. This town, and especially Momo, reminded me that I felt worthless. Like with Hotaru, there was a constant sense of pollution in my heart. Feelings like "I'm too worthless" or "I'm an evil person because I have this dark side." These feelings were there since before Thanatos exposed that I do have a dark side, but merging with it was like being forced to look in the mirror at myself while I had just kicked a puppy or something. My evil half was cruel, but I could see that she had not made me do this. I did this, because I lived in guilt, for all those poor creatures I'd killed. For all the hardships of this journey, but mostly because I still felt like a poor beggar who had to fight and even kill to survive. It had mostly been rats back then, but now I'd learned how to kill people... And yet, I saw Nevras's eyes. They were not a look of fear or of disgust, they were a look of love and sadness. It was like he was looking at a girl at a party with tattoos covering scars from all the times she cut her wrists, and wanting to hug her. He saw the whole of me, the good and the bad. And he loved me, flaws and all. Things were looking up.

NEVRAS

I couldn't help it. Maybe it's like the girlfriend of the guy who beats up the dog and child, and who occasionally beats up the girl herself. You know, the girl who keeps telling herself "deep down he's a decent guy" and attacks or shouts at anyone who tells her the truth. But when I saw her, I saw the same Ambrosia that had traveled with us all this time. Ambrosia hadn't suddenly become a random psycho, she had inherited what she believed was her evil side. Honestly, I'm not so sure of that, more like her emotional side. And she probably kept telling herself something along the lines of how she was a horrible person so she might as well keep doing this stuff. She was probably acting out. I'm not sure she could even get at the real root of her suffering, it was probably just a pervasive feeling of worthlessness. No worries, it happens to all of us.

But when I saw her, all I saw was a damaged person. Someone who had believed in their quest and was looking at all the creatures they'd killed, and not looking hard enough of the towns they'd helped defend. Or the town that got a bamboo water-purification system thanks to her random whim. Or the time we helped Phoenix invent new technology that would prevent food from going bad, fending off hunger for places that had drought or famine otherwise. It's easy to dwell on failures, but not as much to look back at one's life from the other side, and keep trying. Ambrosia was in a bad spot. But she could get better, she could get through this, as long as I believed in her.

AMBROSIA

I went outside, I looked at all the cut up bodies from our fights to get through this city. And those poor cultists. When I felt worthless again, I remembered how much he cared for me. I knew then that if I could love myself as he loved me, and if I could love others with that same intensity, then I could certainly master the power of the Tao. I felt I could do anything. Probably?

I was filled with remorse for my actions. I didn't want to kill any of these people. Not the officers who were only following orders, not the cultists that were deceived, none of the people I killed in this town deserved to die! Well, except for that bitch Momo, but she totally brought that on herself by calling me manly. Out of the depths of my soul, I called out the words, "***Reset!***" To my utter shock, everyone except the demonic police chief, the giant Maple Tree, and of course Momo got restored to their original place intact. Even the door to the police station was repaired. Michael stared, "How is it that you did that? That was Script!" I shrugged, "God had always been doing it, so I guess I picked it up?" He shook this head as if to say that wasn't possible. I had no idea then.

In any case, our business in these towns was done. Michael said in no uncertain terms that we had to finish up our quest soon because he had business to take care of. Anyway, we had freed up the Tethers that were probably keeping Belial immortal, and totally didn't just beat up a random maple tree. So we headed our boat over to the island where Belial waited in his castle to once again try to challenge him.

CHAPTER 20

In which Jesus takes over the world. Mwahahaha!!!

THE WORLD

Destiny is not fixed in stone. Although the past repeats, people have the ability to make completely different decisions. However, those who have hardened their hearts will always repeat the same path. As it would happen today.

The only forces still in battle were Phoenix and Kushiyama. They had fought for a long time, so Phoenix tried a strategy. While King Charis's main force sent their wizards and dragons and knights from the north caves near the Eastern Continent, they sailed ships to sneak in from the south through the mountain pass.

King Charis was a brave and charismatic leader. He always led his troops from the front. King Yama, on the other hand, was a coward. While his forces fought off superior forces quite well from the north, he was caught from behind and killed by a flank attack. It seemed like as before, the Council would fall to lack of leadership.

But someone decided to make a choice. Since Jesus was among the few who had some charisma, and he knew the consequences if the Council should fall completely, he moved to have a vote to elect a new leader. The candidates were a man named Yosef Ben Yacob and a young woman named Maria Virginia. Maria Virginia had a strong Catholic base, while Yosef was popular among the Jews. Aside from that, Eponine Von Sanguine, a vamp appeared on the ballot. She only made public appearances in forested areas, at night, or on cloudy days. On a write-in, Jesus Christ also appeared on the ballot. Overwhelmingly, the public voted for him, because of his actions in town, but a rigged ballot caused him to lose. For a moment, it appeared Eponine was the leader, but an upset public declared fraud, and a recount was made.

A careful observer noted that this was essentially a rigged ballot on both sides. While Eponine "won" by rigging the ballot, on Jesus's side, Maria Virginia and Yosef Ben Yacob appeared to be Jesus's parents. That is, even if he had not been wildly popular for healing the sick, helping the poor, and generally reducing the amount of misfortune suffered by the general populace as a result of King Yama's misrule, if one of those two won, they would probably elect him. Given the corruption involved, a tie-breaking vote was cast, and Jesus won.

And so it was that Jesus, who had been placed under imprisonment within the town of Kushiyama, was now its leader. His first act was to do... absolutely nothing. He declared that leaders liked to lord over their people, but he would start by serving and by listening to the public, and try to do away with any laws that made the people suffer. After abolishing King Yama's taxes and lowering taxes in general, giving all public works to management of private companies, he next sent letters to members of the Council asking them to (1) abolish any currency that required a Mark in order to do business on grounds that it alienated customers, (2) end the current wars as soon as possible, and (3) to reconvene the Council and work on trying to set up its rules again.

Of course, not all went smoothly. It was months of hard struggle, since those who enter in despotic systems usually have to fight their way out. There were protesters who said the election had been rigged, despite most districts within Kushiyama voting for Jesus. In particular, the vampire minority felt like they were underrepresented, since they had a huge population, despite the fact that they didn't go outside to actually show up to vote. There were those who claimed there was some sort of conspiracy or collusion, and that Kushiyama was really working with Ghobli. When their nonsense fell on deaf ears, they turned to increasingly more extreme tactics. People increasingly claimed that Jesus hung out with the wrong sorts of people, and some claimed he had been around prostitutes and murderers. Some even had pictures of these meetings. And yet, Jesus was nonetheless popular with a wide variety of people. Failing this, they turned to claims that Jesus should be put on trial and stripped of his power. They tried to impeach his character. And many were giving false testimony against Him, but their testimony was not consistent. Failing this, they invented artificial crises and declared Jesus not up to the task. These people, these vampires, had seen the effects of a big centralized state, and thought it could care for them for life, never realizing that it could also give them suffering far more easily. Jesus was prepared to give them what they wanted as soon as they stopped fighting. And yet, their ignorance made them fight him.

Failing to find any legal reason to remove him, they decided to try a coup. They were at their most violent, burning buildings and people, smashing old statues of people they never liked anyway. It was always like this. And yet, Jesus loved them too. They told themselves they were fine with the djinn, demons, and lizard people ruling in the place of the Council, as they have done throughout history. They certainly didn't want Jesus to rule them. There was fighting in the streets, and people were hurt just for having certain hats or shirts that said they were in favor of Jesus. In other countries, such things weren't happening because they either had accepted the Council's way like Phoenix, or rejected it entirely. But in the months to come, there would be issues in such places also, as people struggled to go back to the way of the Council. It was a very tough road.

It was easy to leave the Council, and turn to corrupt systems. But suddenly, one day, they put up no more fight. They had run out of other people's money. The taxes were high, but nobody wanted to work, when working meant you had to get implanted with a tracking chip. It also helped that those trying to fight Jesus found their arrows turned into flowers, and their swords turned into coins for alms for the poor. It helped also that even those seeking handouts suddenly found themselves with jobs. As this process was going on, Jesus left to visit the Council.

It was Jesus's first official visit outside Kushiyama for centuries. Now it is true, he routinely appeared in Christmas Village, he was Mu'ad Dib in Qurac, and was the Aiken Master. He was also technically omnipresent. But according to the letter of the law, he had not technically been out until just now. He traveled by water across the sea to the island where the Anti-Government Council met. They had received the notice of King Yama's death and Jesus's ascension to the throne. The daimyo of Gruumi had been replaced along with Jesus, but all nations were represented. Hinata's Elder, Lajila, met with Jesus and thanked him for appearing. She had seen how things had been without the Council. People were even afraid to leave their houses to spend money because it was unclear what the consequences of not having the Mark had been, and it was not publicly known which towns demanded this monetary system and which did not, aside from Phoenix who strongly declared they opposed it. Hinata's tourism had suffered, and Ghobli's market had taken a hit too.

Everyone sat as she addressed the Council. “I call to order what remains of the Council,” she said with her face downturned, “I ask if you would join me in reforming this group.” She looked around the room. To her immediate left, King Charis and Queen Victoria sat as representatives of Phoenix. They had never left the Council, and raised their hand, silently confirming their vote. Across from her sat the guru of Shoten, a red-haired man who had apparently sat by and watched much of this town become covered with crossdressers and bishounen. He made it a policy to always abstain from voting, but here, they needed a unanimous vote. She sighed. To his right was the chief of Kirin, a blond woman in furs. Next to her was Zuran's mayor, a man big enough to pick up Lajila

with one hand. Jesus sat in King Yama's spot. Right now, he appeared as a nine-year-old girl with purple hair and intense eyes. There was something interesting about this form Jesus had chosen, since she strongly resembled Tamashii. On the right end of the table, three people sat. The daimyo of Gruumi had also been replaced by some sexually ambiguous person. She had guessed it was a girl, until he said, “I approve of the Council rejoining.” Jesus said in a young girl's voice, “I vote to follow the majority.” Next to Gruumi's leader, was the king of Galaxia, an older man, who looked like the years had not been kind to him, and lately like the stress of constantly managing people after the Council had fallen had taken its toll. Galaxia had been one of the towns to approve the Mark system of currency, but it was becoming evident to him that he had made a horrible mistake. Before, he was able to make steady income through sales taxes, but with income taxes and constant tracking of people, he had to always watch others to make sure they didn't revolt. And he actually wasn't making much money anymore, because nobody wanted money so he couldn't tax their income. He tried other taxes, but wound up finding that not only was everyone hoarding their money, but very few still had any. The houses fell apart, the people were in rags, all in the space of a few months without the Council. Galaxia's mayor also voted to reinstate the Council. Next to him was the mayor of Ghobli, a greedy and devious man, interested only in making money. He spoke up, “For years, I have made a profit through trade and unscrupulous sales taxes. Even for me, they were a little much... And for years, the Council has made me rich through trade deals. But with the Council gone, I could only make money through war trade. War is profitable, yes, but your clients tend to die off. I too vote to reinstate the Council.”

So far, Phoenix, Ghobli, Galaxia, maybe Kushiyama, and Gruumi had voted for the Council. Things were looking up, but there had yet to be a unanimous decision. The king and queen of Aquamundo cooled off in a makeshift water trough, before raising their hands. Next to me sat the chief exorcist of Goji, a woman with eyes of nearly the intensity of Jesus. She spoke, “For many years, I have kept watch over the world of spirits. I have purged, purified, and exorcised the dead from famine and disease. Yet these past few months, I have noticed a sharp rise in the amount of spirits that arrive, and most of them are close to becoming vengeful dead. I know not what this group opposed to the Council promises its members, since they have not contacted us. But I have seen them by their fruits. I strongly support the Council and encourage everyone to do the same. The Council was built as a necessary evil to prevent the return of the State.”

In order to re-establish the Council, they needed a unanimous vote. In order to disband the Council, they needed at least 1/3 of the votes to be to abolish it, and all must be present. In between those two, a less than unanimous vote was a vote to reconvene at a later time. In the war-torn and poverty-stricken states left in the absence of the Council, this was nearly as disastrous as voting to abolish the Council. They could not spare much longer of misrule. Kirin, Zuran, Hinata, and Shoten had yet to vote. Hinata's leader spoke, “Well, I have always been in favor of the Council, as without it, we would just be a tourist town. I vote to stay part of this system.” This decision was fairly obvious, actually. Kirin's leader spoke next, “Likewise, we are a town in the middle of subarctic climate. We would be stranded without resources if not for cooperation with other states. And when the Council operates, it keeps us from being attacked or invaded by nearby Kushiyama. I also want the Council back.” Zuran's leader raised his hand. It was up to Shoten, a nation whose leader in recent memory had always abstained from voting, in order to make the final call, since the decision must be unanimous.

Shoten's guru started, “I abs-” but was quickly interrupted by the others, expecting what he'd say. “Please,” Goji's chief exorcist requested, “think about what you're doing!” The guru of Shoten tried to speak again, “I abstain from voting normally, as I don't like to side with one group or the other. But Jesus over there showed me another option. I vote with the winners.” Everyone cheered. It was unanimous.

Since the Council had been set up again, Lajila as leader of it said, “Okay everyone, I know you people are excited and thankful to once again be able to do things, but this brings up a very good point. We have a backlog of administrative duties to take care of. Let's see... abolishing the Mark system of money is the first order of business, and I will put this on rush executive order because it needs to be dealt with immediately. The

economy is kinda bad right now, and we need to make sure farmers and merchants are able to deliver goods and sell them, and be paid for it properly." She handed a note to be copied and delivered to one of her clerks. "Next. The Mark system also created a surveillance mess. Anyone in the world can now be tracked to even the most remote location. While this would be effective for resolving kidnapping, the fact that it is not attached to worn objects but to the body itself, represents gross invasion of property." The members nodded vigorously, saying, "Amen!" Lajila continued, "It is my mission to remove and dispose of all such tracking devices within a year. As you know, Aquamundo has the best surgical equipment of any of the member states here, and Goji with its religious background has by far the best thaumaturgy experts. I propose that we send two-person teams to remove the object from inside the body and to perform healing after this. Are there any opposed?" None raised their hands. Gradually, surgeons would help people remove their chips, although the whole process wound up taking years to hunt everyone down. "I propose we set a maximum income tax of 10%, a tithe to be given voluntarily," Goji's exorcist suggested, "in the past, the Council had no income taxes, but some countries may want more or less services in their towns. Allowing them to pay what they want allows some things to be subsidized, while allowing other people the right to opt out." At this, the entire Council erupted into argument. Some were of the mind that *any* income and property taxes were rapacious, and a sure way to have people revolt. Others liked the voluntary aspect of it, but here too there was disagreement since it wasn't clear what would happen if some people didn't pay for these subsidies but others did. Others believed that such subsidies were unnecessary, and in fact they were offered would one day make people indebted to big states. Still others used the "slippery slope" argument that allowing some income tax would start at 10% but might end closer to 80%.

Both Jesus and the daimyo of Gruumi were new to the Council, but Jesus had a reputation for being good or perfect, which government leaders found insufferable. It was undeserved even while Jesus lived as a normal human, not someone who could become a little girl one moment and a 6 foot man in another. But Jesus had always put up with this. Even among Christians, they asked WWJD or "What Would Jesus Do?" You had to remember though, that flipping tables was one of the options. And so, they asked Jesus for input, testing him as many others had done. Jesus said, "Why do we need to directly be involved in this? How about we make these things private services, that people can pay someone for? And for the towns that don't want it, won't they just not pay?" They debated among themselves, and eventually arrived on exactly this, to make a private service funded by voluntary offering. For stuff like roads, private companies would only build what they paid into, so some roads might be delayed or unfinished. It seemed absurd to build three-quarters of a bridge though, so they proposed an idea. Those taken alive by the bounty offices would be able to work off their imprisonment by helping in construction projects. Since the bounty office was also privatized, this cost them nothing. Of course, it only worked for their human prisoners, as the creatures weren't really much good at carrying out manual labor.

As for the other expenses, the Council (unlike most governments) was not in the business of making money, but of saving money. And so it was that the spent the better part of the next hour figuring out how to fund such things until arriving on the notion that there should be a state-run black market of sorts that sold porn, drugs, and explosives to the public. Jesus wept. Well, not much. He'd come to expect this sort of thing.

The Council debated well into the night, discussing resuming trade routes and figuring out what to do about the new discovery of underground technology. They had found not only new weapons (most of which they decided to put back, except for those which had other uses such as using explosives to mine/farm) but also improvements in medicine, construction, and especially agriculture. Jesus nixed the advances in medicine outright, except with regard to hygiene and plumbing, putting them in the same category as the most destructive weapons. This shocked much of the Council, which sought to justify this apparent lack of compassion. Jesus explained, "Long ago, medicine did indeed improve health of people. But it also kept people cruelly alive on life support, which caused a population increase and insurance mess. And then there was when the public began to consider killing innocent children for organs and stem cells. It is a good thing to

have clean water and air, and this will indeed make people well, but the other stuff... not so much." Jesus also mentioned the Phantom Virus, and everyone decided not to pursue too much medical intervention.

Jesus on the other hand voted to support construction of roads, walls, bridges, and towers using the latest technology. Almost overnight, villages that before had been stone, brick, or wood became buildings and temples of dramatic artistic variety rivaling the Great Pyramids, Angkor Wat, and the City of Uruk; they also created skyscrapers of metal and glass, made buildings by 3D printing, and even grew cities in organic cultures. Construction and farming machines were built, gradually moving from fission-based uranium engines, to much cleaner equivalence engines. In terms of agriculture, the Council helped build multi-level garden cities and created domes capable of growing crops in any climate. They put one in Phoenix, another near Qurac, one near Aquamundo, and another near Kirin. Each one thrived despite what was all around them. As for the people who has taken power during the fall of the Council, once they lost legitimacy, regular townspeople in some cases took care of them, and in other cases they fought among each other.

And so it was, that while Ambrosia's group explored the Void, the New Earth gradually became a place where people were happy with life. Mostly. The Tao is balance, so there were still things to worry about. For instance, while the new technology was now free of pollution and was no longer used for war, the natural trade-off of technology is boredom. Some turned to artistic pursuits, others refused to use it or limited their usage. Those most affected by boredom begin to pick up strange desires.

For instance, before transhumanism got banned by the Council for being creepy, people would deliberately amputate limbs so they could replace them with cybernetic ones. The Council quickly amended the laws to this, only allowing such replacements when one had an actual injury, and only when cloning technology was unavailable. Gene-splicing was also widely discouraged. The Council knew that chimera experiments were the cause of lizard people. The lizard people were genetically modified to have a resilient body, powers of illusion and darkness, unending youth, super strength, and basically everything but a heart and soul. These were a group of beings that delighted in human sacrifice, who ran governments behind the scenes. The Council wanted no repeats of this, so this was one of those few rules they strictly enforced. Ditto for machine takeovers, which is why alchemy had replaced technology and robotics.

And so, given extreme boredom, people turned to lewd behavior and various pastimes, from *Mah Jong*, to collectible trading cards, to even real gladiator tournaments. And so, all was well, because people turned to porn and whiskey. Or something like that.

MICHAEL

I felt the child inside me "kicking." While we wandered the Realm of Void and faced strong creatures, I occasionally had to sit the fights out. It was okay, though. They were used to me saying arrogant things like, "The battle would be too easy if I helped." The truth was, right now, if I tried to use even my physical powers, I would find myself greatly slowed in battle, thanks to carrying an extra life inside of me. And if I used my Script, it might go haywire.

We had explored many of the towns in the Realm of Void, but I wanted to finish this quest before I delivered, especially since this land was not kind to existence, and I might have my child cease to exist or something along those lines. And so it was that I rather firmly suggested that we stop exploring all these towns, and finally head to Belial's stronghold.

CHAPTER 21

In which puzzles are solved and traps revealed

AZRAEL

The gate to Belial's castle filled me with a vague sense of *deja vu*, but this sense passed when instead of plowing through the door with her power as she did in my memory, Ambrosia gently pushed it open. Inside stood a huge hall with a three doors spaced out directly in front of us, and a fourth gate emptying out into a garden. I decided

that the inside of the castle was basically a self-contained universe, having seen no garden on the way in. Despite the gate still being open, the fact that no grey penetrated into the room appeared to confirm this. In most of the towns we had seen, the presence of color and the ontological inertia that came with it were tenuous at best, where the slightest doubt about a town being able to persist would cause it to collapse. The door being ajar, should at the very least have caused the grey to blend with the color, much like freshwater mixing with nearby saltwater, yet the room was incredibly vibrant for one with such dull furnishings. Aside from the doors and the side passage, there were only two things here, a save point and a magic circle covered by an immense floating crystal.

If I'd been Ambrosia, I probably would have touched the crystal, or the edges of the circle, or both. In fact, she did just that, even going so far as to transform her fishing pole into a hammer to try to break it down. But I knew my runes and symbols, and understood enough to know that this crystal was basically like the magical version of a lock that needed multiple keys to open. So for the time being, I waited. Obviously, we would need to explore these rooms to figure out the way forward to Belial.

We opened the door to the first room, and found that someone had built a series of long platforms stretching out into space. The room appeared fairly straightforward, but to be on the safe side, we roped ourselves together. It was lucky we did, because Lilith stepped on the platform, the floor opened up. It took many of us working together to pull up her dense body, but we managed. We put her at the back of the group, since she could probably pull us up but not the other way around.

Examining the floor of these winding platforms, we figured it could only hold at most about 150 lb, so our more muscular or otherwise heavy members would need to go last, or might need to stay behind. Aqorm tested it out first, walking at a brisk pace, and made it to the other side. She made it look easy, soour heavier members like Lilith and Ambrosia went next. Aqorm found a small metal hook and tied her end of the rope there. She called something out but the room was fairly large, and I don't think any of us could hear her.

AQORM

I tried to warn, “The catch loosens as you stand there. You'll need to walk fast because it'll hold for only a few seconds!” Ambrosia obviously didn't hear, because she was walking slowly, cautiously along the walkway, testing for any weak spots. She fell through of course, as did Elias, Zoe, and Nevras as they stepped to nearby platforms trying to help her up. As I put my palm to my face, I watched as everyone but Azrael, Lilith, Selqui and Yazim Jianne, and Michael dropped through the floor.

The platforms hung above a gaping pit, and it wasn't clear how deep it extended because the bottom couldn't be seen. Not bothering with translating his spells right now, possibly because it was an emergency, Yazim Jianne shouted, “*Return to the Past*!” Of course, this particular temporal spell had a serious flaw. Including the caster, it was difficult to remember the... what was I talking about?

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MICHAEL

Angels, unlike humans, have a great deal of perception of time. There are some temporal spells that affect their time, but their minds still know when something happened. They knew when time was stopped, when it reversed, and when someone changed history. While Yazim Jianne wasn't discerning his own spell, Ambrosia also seemed to notice something but she was unable to remember the finer details. For smaller events, this was usually enough to make changes, but this was a complex set of events. And Ambrosia always tried to get closer since she was curious about what Aqorm said. While Ambrosia was able to fight destiny and had done so numerous times in her quest, fighting her own desires and impulses was another thing.

We had returned to the moment right around when Aqorm called out. I had watched these humans before from Heaven, and there were recordings of their past. Ambrosia had always been impulsive, with the high point right around when she challenged a man for a ship who happened to possess Leviathan. Ambrosia would once again...

"Hey," she said, addressing me, "you can see it, right?" In all the previous versions of the event, she had never talked to me, so I was a bit shocked. It didn't help that lately I was extremely out of sorts lately. You know, because of pain, fatigue, moodiness, bloating, cramping, the spiritual effects of having an angelic body inside of me including the disruption of my energy, and the other complications of an angelic pregnancy. Plus, you know, being stuck in my female form with its hormones. I'm not sure anyone would blame me if my concentration was off. I answered, "See what, exactly?" She clarified, "The repeating events, of course. I can't really see it, more like a vague memory, but I kinda know that I keep doing the same stupid thing over and over again. It's sorta like when God used that Reset thing on us, you know?" Come to think of it, how did she know about that? She had mentioned before how she'd see this effect so much that somehow she'd been able to do it, which was totally ludicrous, but she should not have been able to know that time was repeating in the first place. I saw the Crests on her arm, and remembered she had the powers of Chronos. I shrugged. "Every single time, you walk forward on that walkway, and the platforms give way under your feet," I explained, "and then the others try to help you up, and end up falling themselves. Then Yazim Jianne over there returns us to the past, and nobody but me seems to have any memories of the event." I looked at their vacant stares, and I knew Michael was right.

She nodded, "I get it. But... how are we going to cross?" I took her by the waist, and walked her across quickly while flapping my wings slightly. Where there used to be two sets of footprints, there was only one, because this was when I carried her. I wound up doing the same to Nevras. Lilith refused this treatment, instead flapping her wings to reach the other side. Her wings were awkward and clumsy, and barely flew, but she was determined to show that she didn't need me. I allowed this. Yazim Jianne and Selqui worked together to form a sort of bubble that floated them across. Zoe used one of her beast shapes and turned into a bird to make it across, then extended the chain from the Sword of Sorrow and dragged Azrael across too. And then, all of us had reached the other side. We walked through the door into the next chamber, and found a similarly suspended walkway Our group was understandably frightened. "Be not afraid," I said.

When I tried to skip to the other side, I noticed a closed door. I tried to unlock it with my Script. I tried burning it, freezing it, or simply bashing it with my sword. The door seemed to deflect any sort of force I threw at it, so I was tempted to give up in frustration. Then Elias, noticing that the platforms did not appear to have any trapdoors, decided to start walking along the path instead. As he did, the individual stone squares lit up as he stepped on them, and he quickly was able to figure out that this was a puzzle to light up

all the squares of the winding pathway in this room. The walkway coiled like some sort of snake but he carefully turned in such a way that each square lit one after the other. He almost got stuck at one point, but after careful observation he got to the end of the walkway with all squares lit. The squares blinked white, as though interacting with each other, then suddenly they went dim, as the door swung open. We rushed the door before it decided to close on us. We just barely made it!

The next room turned out to be more of the same, but worse. It was a massive square puzzle of about 900 tiles with walls or gaps breaking the tiles up. This time, Elias sat down and planned through his path, certain that the slightest wrong move would paint him into a corner, and activate some sort of trap that would kill us all, or at the very least teleport us outside this room.

ELIAS

I headed north first, making a sharp turn east and then south, then east again and north again. I zigzagged in this way while the others dared not retraced my footsteps. Before long, I lit all the squares and had to rest from a massive headache. The door swung open.

The next room was strangely at odds with the rooms of puzzles from before. It was a simple chamber with cultists standing around each other murmuring. I couldn't exactly make it out, but it seemed like I heard them entreating some place called the Shadow Realm to accept souls and grant them power. They also appeared to be holding some sort of collectible cards. We were just about to walk away when some of them who were at the northern part of the circle noticed us. They asked us to stay and become a sacrifice, and the door mysteriously swung shut. A ponderous fiend ascended from the center of the circle, having just been summoned. It appeared stunned for the moment, an obvious sign of what was known as summoning sickness.

Luckily for everyone there, Azrael had a good grasp on her knowledge of runes and symbols, and I had studied creatures some. I had read *Horrific Critters and How to Kill Them* by Drake Dingleberry, so I knew the weaknesses of goblins, trolls, and otyughs. Unfortunately, so did everybody, so for the most part this book hadn't been very useful. But this was an uncommon creature, this was a Cursed Beast, a summoned creature of unfathomable power. It had knowledge of the elements and the ability to massively weaken our defenses, coupled with regeneration, near-immunity to the same elements, and skin too tough for weapons. They tried hitting it with attacks and spells with no luck. With all its great strengths however, its weaknesses were pretty simple. It had a set pattern of attack, and an inability to improvise. I advised, “Azrael, cast Restrict Healing to get rid of its regeneration, then Zoe and whoever else should follow up with magic that poisons its health. Also we need to use reflection spells. Ambrosia, get in front, and use Apollo's power to bounce its spells back.” She protested, “But magic isn't doing anything!” I gave her a glare to the effect that she should just do so anyway, and she complied. Poisoning the creature and removing its healing worked like a charm, and yet it seemed for a moment that Ambrosia was right, it was immune to the spells reflected back. But the creature ran afoul of its effects instead, trying to weaken the effects of our elemental resistance. Now we were not only able to damage it, but its own spells were turned back against it. The cultists looked shocked that it could be defeated so easily, but they gave us no more trouble. The door swung open.

We left these rooms, and headed into the next door of the lobby. The room inside was a puzzle room of another sort. It was filled with a set of orbs set up in geometric patterns, with a similar look to Glow Orbs, but which the switch changed the color rather than switching the light on or off. There was a stone plaque on the wall, so we read it. «*In brightest day, in blackest night, no evil shall escape my sight. Let those who worship evil's might beware my power...*» I read, but the last part seemed to be scratched out. I had read much of literature, but I had no idea what this might pertain to. I only noticed that the general pattern of placement of these orbs looked vaguely like some sort of lantern. As I deliberated about this puzzle, Zoe and Ambrosia seemed to know what they were doing. They swiftly turned the switch to green. As the last orb turned, the door suddenly swung open. I had no idea what just happened.

The room we entered was also a puzzle room, but of a decidedly more active nature. Near the doorway, a sign read, «Sandworms are nothing to mess around with. They can be beaten back, but little can subdue them for long. If you had something to freeze the air, it would be different.» Ah yes, sandworms. The bigger and nastier cousins of the olgoi khorkoi. Rather than eating dead meat like good little scavengers, these worms had been known to eat live people. This was a good reason why people stayed away from certain deserts, besides the extreme heat and the decided lack of moisture. I studied the room before entering. The boundary of this room appeared to be a solid block of sturdy brick, preventing the sandworms from reaching us. Like the other room, it had a geometric pattern of orbs, yet this one more resembled a snowflake than anything else. It wasn't quite the color of a snowflake though. As a test, I dropped a small loose pebble, only to watch the sandy ground heavy and churn. As I watched, the sand sloshed , so there was probably some water mixed in with that sand. Enough dust was kicked into the air that I actually sneezed. I noticed then, that like the edge of this doorway, the area around these orbs had long pillars of the same sort of brick. Once we stood where these were we should be relatively safe. The trouble was, when the sand churned, the ground was at least 10 feet lower than the pillar. To say nothing of what was probably quicksand. We would need some way to get to these things.

Michael offered us a solution. Using his Script, he said, ***"Reusable Drawbridge, Duration - Concentration."*** A bridge of solidified light formed ahead of us, so we crossed to the first pillar. This bridge was such that it could be unsummoned and "moved" for a very efficient effect. But for a reason that I suspected but dared not state aloud, he appeared to be straining himself. We crossed slowly this time, but I was wary. The others seemed not to notice. The first orb was switched until it turned blue. I looked around from out position, and there were about 13 such orbs, but counting this one, four of them had now been activated. Nine more to go.

But something was wrong with Michael's creation. It seemed to be flickering, like the light was going out. All of a sudden, it did exactly that, stranding some of us apart on different switch platforms, and making Selqui fall to the depths below.

SELQUI

It wasn't as terrible as it sounds. All my life, I have been surrounded by sand and sea. This mucky water was no big deal. I converted my legs to a seal tail, and swum around the sandy water. It was not ideal, as this stuff was a bit like quicksand, but I managed. The sandworms circled about me, but I pulled out my trident and used it to channel electricity. The sandworms were stunned, but it was not enough to destroy them. While I could rush in and impale one of them, it was likely the others would try to finish me off. I used these few seconds to move my tail, so to speak. Breaking the surface, my hands touched the surface of the pillar. I had a firm grip, and so I was in no danger of falling, but my body was too sludgy with sand to pull myself up under my own power. And also, I still had a seal's rear portions, so I was in no position to climb up under my own steam.

I felt the rush of sand and water nearby. The sandworms were edging closer. I wriggled but it was no use, for I simply wasn't used to life on land. I was not about to give up though, I *would* climb up. Well, that is, if the sandworms didn't eat me first... Looking behind me as I struggled, three sandworms were closing in. The nearest one was about 10 cubits (roughly 15 ft) away. For long distances in the water, nautical miles or knots were used, but we from Atlantis grew up using cubits. It was 9 cubits away now, then 6 cubits. It was moving faster now!

It surfaced, and I saw its hideous maw opened wide. Rows and rows of teeth in a concentric pattern faced back at me. Well, as much as it could face me, for sandworms are probably blind. They had light-sensitive cells on the edge of their body, and they were adept at sensing vibrations. So, at the last possible second, I lunged to the side. The worms noticed, and tried to turn, but they were rushing forward far too quickly, and the closest annelid slammed into the pillar. The vermin was knocked out, and I had been spared from being eaten. Unfortunately, the shock waves from it hitting the pillar threatened to knock me back into the sandy leachate.

I fell for a second, before a hand grasped mine. I recognized that hand, but it alone was too weak. The other was held and I took it. But the sorcerer's hands were really too frail for this sort of thing, and he was starting to get pulled into the water with me. Then other hands grabbed him, and the momentum pulled me on top of Yazim Jianne. “Hey, nice to see you too,” I smirked, “but we'll have to save the fun for later.”

Looking around, I noticed most of the switches had in fact turned blue. It looked like they had been tripped by arrows. Zoe was standing nearby with her bow actually smoking from the friction. “Looks like the one we're standing on is the last. Everyone ready?” After a lot of hesitation, they all nodded. Eventually.

The worms had noticed that we had escaped and were trying to reach the pillar. Worms can live under water for several weeks before drowning, and can live indefinitely as long as the water is kept aerated. And indeed it was, thanks to the vents I had noticed while I was down there. But these same vents could apparently be set to blast freezing cold air into the water. Aqorm flicked the last switch, and within moments the water froze solid. The worms went into dormancy, but we were able to walk across the surface of ice and sand to the room's exit.

The next room had a locked door secured by a complex puzzle. This puzzle had a series of colored orbs as before, but these had no direct means of changing the color. I'll pass the narration off to Elias, since he seems good at this kind of thing.

ELIAS

Ahem. So, the signs told us to change all switches from red to blue. Now, the switches were only in two colors, but there were no knobs or buttons on any of these for switching color. Instead, there were nearby arrow-shaped buttons, which when depressed changed red to blue and vice versa. Unfortunately, they changed the entire line, bringing us no closer to a solution. The pattern of the puzzle looked vaguely like a squared-off A connected by an upside-down L, with arrows alongside to help change the colors. Looking around the room, I also discovered a lever that shifted the arrows. Using this, I was able to gradually alter the rows and columns so that all were red, although it took quite a bit of back and forth. From there, it was an easy matter to turn the columns blue, and then the rows would... oh right, overlap.

Hours later, we managed to make everything line up, and the door swung open. The room inside was a small library. Most of these were familiar books by now, but I noticed one called *Ouroborus.* Opening this book proved to more than we bargained for, however, as the concept of an Ouroborus leaped from the pages. Quite literally.

Any alchemist worth their salt knows what an Ouroborus looks like. I mean really, I shouldn't even have to tell you people. Oh, all right. So, an enormous serpent dragon appeared, and true to its legend, it was eating its own tail. It gulped and swallowed, becoming so full that it couldn't fit anymore of itself inside. Which of course was the point, the Ouroborus was a living symbol of creation, destruction, and regeneration so it would be eating itself for all of eternity. The problem, of course, was that someone had to defeat it, since it was still guarding the giant crystal outside as one of the keys to opening that magic circle.

We threw practically everything at it, including Lilith spewing Hellfire, but it kept bouncing back. It did, however, take notice of us. It stopped munching on itself long enough to take a long breath in, absorbing massive amounts of energy. Whatever it was going to breathe on us, this was something we probably did not want. By my estimate, it was essential that we do something in the next five minutes. The good news is that while it wasn't eating, it also wasn't healing, but it was extraordinarily resilient.

4:58. Azrael tried to poison it, or cause it to bleed with symbols designed to open up skin. Predictably, its natural abilities gave it resistance to many harmful statuses, so this was a non-starter. She did however manage to tangle it in vines, by boosting Zoe's natural abilities. I also tried to help, buffing everyone with Haste, Bless, and protective spells. But given how long it was taking to suck in its required energy, I didn't actually think much of our survival chances. It was more “being killed instantly” instead of “being turned into a goo by a high-frequency beam of hard light.”

3:00. Aqorm accessed her geomancy, which in this room dropped the ceiling on the dragon, pinning it. It didn't last long though, because Ouroborus thrashed around, swinging its tail. This also loosened some of the thick vines choking it in place. Nevras tried to use the Void Slice, and indeed it did sever the dragon into parts. However, its segmented body quickly figured out how to merge itself again. Azrael tried to impale it with her Black Ice, but its body shrugged off the holes in it as though they were nothing.

1:28. At this point, we tried a kitchen sink approach on it. We threw more Hellfire, Azrael's Black Ice, Nevras's techniques, and even Ambrosia's Tao ability. Nothing seemed to work, because the way its body was designed was extremely rugged. To be fair, the Tao ability did seem to hurt it substantially, but it seemed to be still be able to heal itself. I wasn't sure how it was healing, because it wasn't eating itself.

0:59. We were running out of time, and thus far nothing had worked. But then, Zoe walked up to it, and touched it, and it petrified just like that. What happened?

ZOE

Normally, what I did wouldn't work. Probably one creature in a myriad would actually be affected by this. But when the creature stopped its regenerating, and had to rely on its body's natural defenses, it used other methods of healing. I had watched after Ouroborus had suffered damage from Ambrosia's attack. Similar to my Sage trance, this creature had the ability to draw in *senju* for healing.

Now, normally my Sage ability came with a rather big risk. It only lasted as long or as short as the natural energy I drew into my body, but past a certain level of energy and there was a risk of drawing in more than I could safely control. I had recently learned to do it correctly, but I was still learning to sustain it for periods longer than a few minutes. Lost of control meant the natural energy would try to remake me in its image, and that meant turning into stone.

Since it was able to passively absorb natural energy, I decided to force it to do so. I gathered energy slowly, and tried to transfer it to Ouroborus. Halfway through, I realized that this method of gather and release would help me better sustain my Sage form since I could control how much energy I had for how long, but for now, it was a weapon to use against this dragon. The dragon Ouroborus, as all creatures who deal with the power of the sage, absorbed the power of nature starting first from its heart, so as it continued to absorb the energy that I supplied, this was that first area to be affected. Now a dragon's heart is not in its chest but in its center where also its soul is, so I watched as the dragon gradually turned gray before falling to the ground and shattering, since it could no longer fly. Where once there had been a mighty creature, now there was concrete chunks.

Two down, two to go. The next door was just a bunch of rooms with creatures to fight. The doors would not open until all were defeated. Most of these creatures were just petty bears or unicorns or sprites or faeries, but a few of them did give us trouble. The group of phoenixes (phoenices?) kept being reborn and using their magic to revive each other. Finally, we ended up just using a mix of Wind and Ice magic to just freeze them solid. A group of elves were in another room, and gave a lot of us some troubles since their bows and arrows were well-made. But Nevras and Lilith working together were able to deal with those as well. The third room had a titan, and elder dragon similar to Bahamut, and a group of three Reanimators. While these first two were very powerful creatures, the third were much more challenging to fight since they not only had dark magic and necromancy,but they were like ghouls, and all three had to be killed at once or they would revive the others. After a long and frustrating battle, Azrael just used Exorcism to sweep them all away. The next room was an armory with what appeared to be a rare White-Furred Mogli. Its cute teddy bear-cat body, pointed ears, and bat wings made me want to hug it so bad, but Mogli (or moogles, as they are called in some circles) are a cautious species, and will use powerful magic if threatened. So I instead approached slowly and tried to act nonchalant, as I plotted to cuddle it while its back was turned. But it knew better, and kept its eyes aware of me at all times. In fact, it was so aware of me that it almost didn't notice one of our group trying to touch the sword in the corner of the room. "Wait, don't touch.." it screamed, just in time to have Nevras grab it, "that!" But it was too late. The paper attached to the sword slid off, and the evil aura that

had once surrounded that sword returned. A powerful creature came out of the weapon, but Ambrosia just didn't had time for this crap, and just turned her fishing pole into a really big hammer and smashed the weapon to bits. Without a medium to come out of, the spirit of the sword basically got stranded.

The last place we visited was the forested area to the right of the main lobby. We wound up having to cross several rivers by jumping on logs floating in the water, and in some cases pushing logs into water. We didn't dare swim across for fear of being eaten by gators, crocodiles, or piranhas. This is also why we avoided tall grass, for fear that a wild creature might appear. It took quite a bit of walking and leaping across gaps, but eventually we made it to a graveyard at the northern section of the forest. After reading several interesting tomb markings, including stones for people named John Ronald Reuel Tolkien and Leonard Nimoy. Whoever they were. After spending a time there, our eyes got tired, and we woke up surrounded by a strange structure of stones. Elias called it a Stonehenge. We tried to leave, but every path wound back to the stones. So Lilith had the idea of attacking the stones. On any other group of stones, this would go unpunished, but this Stonehenge was magical, and probably sentient, so summoning creatures was not unthinkable. A red flower, a sprite, and a unicorn appeared from the wood and attacked us. We tried to ignore them and target the Stonehenge, but there were a few problems with this. First, it was incredibly strong and seemed to soak up runes and finished magic alike, to say nothing of being rugged enough that our strongest weapons seemed to do little good. Second, the creatures were frighteningly strong, as we noticed when the unicorn casually poked at my leg and tore a hole right to the other side. It was a really good thing that I was eternal. I pulled out the Sword of Sorrow and swung, killing these creatures on the spot. Only, they didn't stay dead. The Stonehenge brought them back to life! This battle might be impossible?

Then I noticed something happening. A small crack appeared on the stone, where before even our strongest attacks couldn't make a dent (well, my sword couldn't make a dent anyway; it wasn't a sword for slicing through rock). “Hey guys,” I said, “I think when we beat these critters and it revives them, it gets hurt!”

And so the battle began in earnest. The flower, it turned out, was very weak to fire and the sprite didn't like cold so two of these Azrael and I were able to handle. As for the horse, everyone knows horses are weak to being cut up and turned into glue. The Sword of Sorrow made this battle much easier because of its instant death abilities. Before long, the Stonehenge crumbled into rock powder, and the summoned creatures just sorta faded away. I think that was the last creature we were supposed to defeat.

The way back from the graveyard was a blur, and somehow we seemed to get straight back to the lobby without nearly the trouble we had getting here. The crystal blocking the magic circle was now shattered, exposing the gate underneath it. We stepped on that, and were transported to another place.

A long hallway ahead suddenly was interrupted by those two. Sera and Phim guarded access to the path ahead. Now, we could have just tried to kill them off, but it felt better if we at least talked to them first.

With her usual tact, Aqorm said, “Again?!? C'mon guys, give it a rest. How'd you get here anyway?” Sera explained, “We had a message in a dream to enter this portal, and wound up offered a deal.” That didn't really explain *how* they got here, but okay. Sera continued, “I'm sorry to do this... I mean really, you guys are starting to grow on us. Except Aqorm.” And he and Phim pulled their weapons out. He sighed, “But our employer has promised us all the money in the world, if we serve him. We need the money!” I looked at their eyes, and I could see the desperation and thirst for wealth.

Aqorm pleaded with them, “That's the devil's bargain, guys! What are you doing?” Seeing no real response from Sera, she tried Phim instead, “I wish you'd talk some sense into Sera.” The dwarf shook his head, “Sorry, Aqorm, no can do. We're being paid too much to stop.” Yet she refused to back down, “Look guys, we know your employer. Unlike the ones before, he only wants to destroy the universe. We're going to stop him.” Sera likewise refused to change his position, “That sounds like an excuse, c'mon fight us!” Aqorm sighed and shook her head, “I just can't do this anymore. Sorry guys, we haven't time to waste.” Phim turned to Sera, “I think they really mean it. Let's follow

them. If their story checks out, we'll save the money we have if they save the world." Sera shrugged, "Fair enough. And if they are lying to us, we can dispense with them later anyway. And so, they joined as guest members of our party. We continued down the hall and made our way toward a corridor.

AMBROSIA

I entered a long corridor. I walked along for roughly a mile, yet I appeared no closer to either the beginning nor end of the corridor. I felt like I had been here before, yet my memory was hazy inside this hallway.

We were getting nowhere. I was trapped. I couldn't move forward, and I couldn't go back, and I couldn't get out except maybe by dying. And with my luck, I'd even wind up as a ghost stuck in this very hall. I kept walking. I had gone maybe five or ten miles. The hall had carved stone walls, a dresser mirror, a table, and some old lights staggered every few feet. Every now and then, a gargoyle statue or a large bowl of trinkets showed up. I could gauge roughly a length of about 150 yards. It was impressive, but I'd seen the same stuff over and over again. My legs gave out. "I feel like I've been walking forever," I said, "sorry, but I just need to rest here." I took a nap for a few hours. "I'm fine now," I said. I walked yet some more. Finally, I said, "No good... It's hopeless. I keep walking forever, and it just keeps going on and on..." My eyes blinked, and suddenly, I noticed that much of the furniture was missing, leaving the hall now with just bare stone walls. Maybe I had just imagined it anyway. "Will I ever return from this quest? Will I ever see my family again?" I had just learned who my mother was, and who my real father was. And now would I be able to visit them? **You can't**, a voice echoed in my head. "I need to keep going," I said, "but..." **It's hopeless**, a voice echoed in my head. I was soooo hungry and sooooooooooooo thirsty. "If I don't have something to eat or drink soon, I'll die..." The voice called to me, **You never existed**.

Could that really be true? Has all this journey been the final hallucination of a dying person? Or did I die some time during my beggar years? The voice repeated, **You never existed**. That's right. I never existed to start with. My life makes no sense!

I glanced at the reflection of myself inside this warped space. All of a sudden, the face faded away. Then, like a giant mirror shattering, all that I was fragmented. I faded away too. There was no body, no self, no me at all. "I should just fade into nothing and disappear," nobody said. I heard a voice call out to me. "Ambrosia!" I said, "Nevras..." with my voice filled with longing. The voice repeated, **You never existed.** "No, it can't be real," this person who was me said, "Someone like Nevras could never be interested in me. I'm just a character in a book." His voice called all the louder, "Ambrosia. stop that this instant! I can't have you disappearing on me.!" But nobody said, "I'm sorry Nevras. But I don't exist. I'm not sure about you either." Everything around faded into blackness as the voices faded away. Then there was nothing. But wait... a heartbeat. It was slow, but definitely there. I heard a heartbeat. Nothing should exist, if I didn't exist. But there was definitely one there. Then, I heard a voice. *Remember, in deepest darkness shines the light.* God's voice? I heard those voices of nagging doubts again, yet I noticed... they were coming from somewhere. They weren't my own. Straining my senses, I opened my eyes. I realized that I *had* eyes. I was sitting in a room with the others. I said, "Everyone, I love you! Thank you for believing in me!" as I gave everyone nearby a group hug. They looked glad to see me, but I had the vague feeling all of this played out the same way already. I looked around, and gave Nevras a big kiss too.

NEVRAS

I won't lie. It felt pretty great to be kissed after saving someone's existence. Elias had told me about this place, but this was actually the first time I visited this room. We had a few extra members to our team from last time: Yazim Jianne, Selqui, me, and those two bounty hunters. I was hoping that might make a difference, along with our commitment to 100% completionism. True to our deal, Aqorm had urged those two to ask their employer to tell the terms of their employment. If we turned out to be right, we'd have some more allies. If not, there would be added complication to this battle. Yay.

BELIAL

Again, those pesky mortals thought they could take me on. I, who survived the destruction of the universe when Ambrosia died last time. I, who alone had retained his memory through God's system reboot. I, who had already defeated them. I, who had the power of the Tethers keeping me alive. Oh yes, that's right, they don't even know about Tethers because they haven't defeated me in the first place. These were objects or creatures which would keep me alive if someone tried to kill me. With their power, I would surely... wait, something was wrong. I could feel their actions with my demonic senses. They had activated Hotaru again. They had defeated Yoshimori. I felt no power protecting my life. And apparently, they... killed a tree for no reason?

I noticed two groups of traitors. The first was that wizard, Yazim Jianne, the one who had freed me earlier. True, I had betrayed him first, but that was my prerogative as a demon. He didn't have the right to betray me. And those bounty hunters, what were their names again? Yes, if they planned to betray me, they also would be dealt with. I asked, "WHY HAVE YOU TWO COME?" Sera spoke, "Hold it guys, before we battle, we need to be sure whether we're helping Belial or you guys. " The elf member of this party seemed to think about something. "Oh, yes," she asked, "I almost forgot. Belial, before they earn their pay, these mercenaries wanna know where the money's coming from, so to speak." How dare a mere elf talk to me this way. "WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?" I asked. Phim spoke next. "I believe what the lady is trying to say," he paused, "is to ask what your goals here are. What do you intend for the Earth?" I scoffed. Mortal beings should not ask such questions. Not after what was done to me. "THIS WORLD IS UNDER CONSTANT TURMOIL, AS YOU HAVE NO DOUBT NOTICED AFTER BEING OUTSIDE FOR ANY AMOUNT OF TIME. WHEN THE WORLD WAS SPLIT, GOD LEFT A BIT OF HIMSELF. THE WORLD YOU LIVED IN IS A WORLD OF EXISTENCE, BUT OURS IS GOD'S SHADOW. THE VOID IS A WORLD OF NONEXISTENCE. EVERYTHING THAT LIVES HERE IS FIGHTING A CONSTANT BATTLE TO SURVIVE THE NEXT MINUTE WITHOUT BEING SWALLOWED UP. LONG AGO, THESE WORLDS WERE ONCE ONE. WITH MY WORK, IT WILL BE SO AGAIN." Phim sighed in relief, "This doesn't sound too terrible. The deal's still on. Give us the money, and we'll stop these guys ourselves!" I'll admit I cackled a bit. It was just so funny. "WHAT GOOD WILL MONEY DO YOU? WHEN THE WORLDS MERGE, EVERYONE ON EARTH WILL BE DESTROYED. YOU'LL HAVE NO PLACE TO SPEND IT." At this, they drew their swords against me. Sera said, "You can kill folk, ruin Earth, and cover the land in demons. But destroying the economy is forbidden!!!" Phim said in response, "Let's show him what the two of us can really do." They rushed towards me, but ultimately, Sera had to scold Phim for his slow dwarven speed.

I noticed something else... when Ambrosia had last come, her power felt shaky, and her confidence shot about something. This time, she seemed confident, she seemed to stare longingly at that boy, and from the looks of it, her attack wouldn't go the same way. Yes, having been inside her attack before, I knew exactly how it worked. I would need to devise a counter. I would need to use the Darkness Exoskeleton technique.

Summoning all of my demonic abilities, I sucked in a huge amount of energy, and used it to solidify my skin. I attacked with wave after wave of Hellfire. It was all that they could do to dodge out of my way. Puny mortals... But wait, what's this?!? The one known as Ambrosia shrugged off my Hellfire. I pushed my hands forward, calling forth anything I could. As a Fallen, I had awareness of the Script, so I called forth fire, lightning, ice, balls of energy, you name it. The girl crossed her arms defensively, and an aura of golden light surrounded her. My attacks bounced off, and some recoiled and hit me. Meanwhile, I was fending off attacks from all sides. My tough skin allowed me to treat most of these as if paper cuts, but the demon and Michael I had to treat seriously. They could possibly create trouble for me. That swordsman she was making eyes at did not seem to be a serious threat, but he hadn't been here before. This was an unknown. Ah, no matter. I drew out the defensive power that I had been using to harden my body, using it as a sort of concussive radius attack. The others slammed hard against the walls, knocking most of them flat. Now, time for the girl. I used my Script to come up with a spell that would drill a hole right through her barrier, and started building power for a focused non-elemental attack. In the corner of my eye, I could see Ambrosia prepping her stance.

But that human fighter used some sort of void sword technique to cut my left hand before I could finish. "Ahhhhhhhhhh!!!" I screamed. My left hand was a stump, and I spent the next few minutes trying to rejoin my hand, while I breathed fire in his general direction. For one like me, this was a nuisance, not a permanent handicap, but it was

something I couldn't afford. "***Enchant: Hold Person, Duration - 10 minutes,"*** I said using Script. This boy was held in place. I needed to buy time. But it was too late.

I turned to see that Ambrosia was underway on using her Tao ability, and nearly done. I felt the hum of the Resonance of her effect, and struggled to resist it. I moved to cast some kind of barrier spell, only to realize that my Script didn't work. Neither did my demonic breath. It was like she had set up a private room where runes and everything else simply couldn't enter. I tried to grab her, to crush her body. The Tao around us turned, and I could feel what I had just tried on my own body. It felt like it was just the two of us in the entire universe, the more I struggled, the more pain I was in. The two of us were one. And the Tao continued to rotate, the space felt tighter and tighter. I had a growing realization that I completely misunderstood the attack last time. It was a mirror. A giant system of making both of us completely linked with each other. She was a demon. I was a human girl. The Tao rotated. I was the demon again. There was no longer a sense of hero or villain, my enemy or her enemy. We were linked together fully. And the Tao rotated again, the effect getting stronger and stronger, until with a sudden shattering sound, the connection violently broke. I was knocked outside the circle, while she calmly condensed it around herself until there were two of her. My exoskeleton was totaled. They would be able to hurt me easily now.

EVIL AMBROSIA

It felt good to have a body again. I usually lived inside Ambrosia's shadow, but when she used the Tao, it breathed life into me again. Being another side of her soul, I always had to do what she wanted to do, but lately we had been working together a lot better.

We moved like two twins, using our powers in concert, blending Crests, and occasionally using *tai chi chuan* martial attacks to give the thing a good whack. Splitting our body in half meant that while in contact with me, there was a copy of everything she held. I couldn't counterfeit money though, because it would disappear when it left my hand. The two of us stabbed him in different directions with the First Iron dagger. Nevras joined the two of us, recovering from his blow. "We'll handle the front two sides, you flank him," I told him. We kept up the offensive, but Belial decided to ignore us to focus on Nevras, figuring we'd stop fighting if he got hurt. My heart raced.

Then the others rushed to defend him. Azrael and Aqorm came in to Belial's side. Michael and Lilith moved slightly in front of Nevras, allowing him space to set up attack techniques. Lilith swung her bone sword, stripping off a good chunk of flesh from Belial's body. Azrael also used her new sword to make a definite dent into Belial's effectiveness, swinging it around when she wasn't using her symbols. I didn't see Michael using Scripts much, but Michael did manage to put up good defense. Selqui maneuvered around Belial, stabbing with her trident, and zapping the demon with electricity. Elias and Zoe stayed off to the side as healing and support, which was a shame because Zoe's Sword of Sorrow might have ended the battle immediately. This battle was rather disorganized, but the basic result of what happened, was that Belial was slashed by a bunch of weapons from several sides, and when he counterattacked, we tried to heal. Every now and then, someone would cast something, but usually, the pace of battle was such that we couldn't spare a moment. Ambrosia largely just did her own thing, while I issued orders, "Nevras, use Wave Thrust here. And keep your shield up! Elias, Zoe, keep drinking those Mana Potions! We need you healing us. Aqorm, use your geomancy here. Azrael, try to hit him with Exorcism, it might sweep away some of his effects. Michael and Lilith, as you will," figuring their fighting style was best left up to them, "Yazim Jianne, set a time loop here in case we die." Yazim Jianne nodded, and immediately created a circle around us. "All set," he said, "if Belial suddenly kills us, we will loop right back to when I created this thing." I tried to keep giving orders, but the other Ambrosia warned me not to stand out.

SERA

I hate sob stories. I hate our clients telling us about their poor suffering mother as a result why they won't pay up for a job well done, and I hate it enough not to subject you to it. Let's just say my boy Phim has seven nephews and a human girl living in a shack, and the mining trade ain't doing well. And me? Well, I'm binding my chest. The folks at

home keep after me, and if I don't show them the money I'm earning working, they keep asking, “Why is a nice girl like you not married?” Could have something to do with me roaming the country and killing all sorts of stuff for hire. Yeah, I'm a chick, you wanna make something of it? None of your business, anyway.

But there's one thing I hate more than excuses of why people won't pay, and that’s folks that make me go all the way out for a job, then they string me along. So when this loser demon says something about blowing up New Earth, and not having any money for yours truly, I'd had enough. I already hated that a lot of towns wouldn't take my money now, but this is too much.

After these guys managed to crack open this thing's shell and whack it a couple times, we decided to join in. Nevras was pretty good. I mean, he used to suck, but he picked up a lot from us, and figured out some new ways to use his sword. While all those others cast healing or attack spells, I stuck with Phim and Nevras. Phim's weapon and style were suited for straight power, he had an axe much like a fireman's axe with the back end hard enough to smash stone, and a number of techniques that required loads of strength. Nevras, if I had to judge his style, was based around speed but he was trying too hard to favor strength. “Use your Speed Slash, Nevras,” I ordered, “and Phim, do the thing. We need to stall him until it's time.” Nevras looked confused, as he obviously thought it his weakest skill, but I gave him some pointers on how to use his speed to maximize its damage output. I got him to focus on damage per second, and soon instead of just a short chain of six or seven attacks, that chain was chained with others, until he was creating dozens of small slices. Phim called out, “*Pierce*!” Stabbing hard into the creature with the axe, he gouged out a wedge in its body, causing it to bleed profusely. Belial's body was beginning to resemble cube steak with all the tiny cuts and pricks. The thaumaturgy from the others was also adding up, although its endurance was amazing. It was time to use that technique. “Phim,” I shouted out, “we need to use our move!” Phim was like the slowest runner ever, so the others had to stall while this attack set up, but eventually he made his way back to where I was. This technique needed the two of us, because I had to spin in midair, and I wasn't quite fast to do so without a bit of loft. “*SeraPhim Slice*!” we called out, and Phim tossed me in midair. As I spun around in a corkscrew, I tossed my sword, which ripped so fast through the air that it appeared to burst into flames. Needless to say, this was an incredibly damaging attack that typically ignored physical and elemental defenses. Belial toppled over.

I'd like to say this was the end of him, but big boss creatures often had multiple forms. Sure enough, its back began to split open at the seams like a butterfly breaking out of its cocoon. The next form looked less like a giant serpent and more like a conventional demon. It was a bit tall, though. Like, 30 ft or so. This form appeared to have less physical mass and defense than the others, but after seeing it cast several spells without saying a word, I concluded Belial Necros as I decided to call him was a silent caster. I never bothered studying magic, except to make myself aware of indirect magic, for I was immune to most of it. I didn't believe in that nonsense, so it didn't affect me. But this guy was a step above that, able to cast with nothing more than a gesture and an idea. Since we couldn't stop him from casting, the next best thing was to keep him off balance. “Hey, Nevras and Phim, I need you to use Wave Thrust around his feet. I'll show you what to do next.” They did as they were told, and a massive shock wave ripped the demon's legs, throwing him on all fours. “Follow my lead, Nevras,” I instructed. I rushed forward, swinging my sword and using the Vacuum Slice. One of his hands fell off and he leaned on the opposite side. Then Nevras chopped of his other one, and he fell prone. I delivered the final blow to his skull. This wasn't the end of the battle either.

But it was the end of the battle for us. The next form of Belial was its original Nephilim form. Phim and I have a strict “no-angel” policy. I've seen too many people give driven crazy by offing little cherubs so nahhh, even if it looks like an angel, no dice.

I pulled out a scroll. We got to this place by using one, after hearing Belial's sweet deal. Nahhh, you don't need magic to activate scrolls, you just open it up, and say “*Activate Scroll*!” And we did just that. So long, suckers!

I figured those two might not stick around. This is why while everyone else was distracting Belial, I set to work prepping a greater magical circle, using a ton of runes. I used Hebrew here, as I figured it would be good against angels and demons. It read in a circle, « אתם אשר טמאתם בתוך כדור הארץ החדש, אתה תהיה כלואה בתוך הכלא הזה עד אחד בא להכניע אותך » loosely commanding Belial not to move. The circle closed without his notice and he was trapped. Belial was throwing around powerful effects like balls of light, or beams of cosmic energy. He appeared to be using Script at this point, and his powers looked frightening. As an added precaution, I asked Azrael to use some sort of protection ability. Noticing my circle before the others, she said, "*Protection Against Good and Evil*." The inside of the circle filled with a strobe light column of white and black light, and his Script couldn't be used. He began to try using other attacks again, but these were much less powerful.

With him distracted casting spells on all of the others, I snuck behind him and quietly started my ritual. All of my ritual materials were made by EZ-Ceremony, and were designed to be set up and taken down quickly, be extremely lightweight and portable, yet suitable for any liturgy. My ritual table for instance was the size and weight of a card deck but unfolded into a card table and the leg stretched out. I quickly put up a tablecloth and candles for the ceremony. My cauldron was about the size of a thimble but expanded into a full-size container. It was self lighting too! I lit the candles, while I heard Belial talk in the background. He taunted, "YOU FOOLISH MORTALS! YOU BELIEVE YOUR EFFORTS WILL SUCCEED. PREPARE YOURSELVES FOR MY ULTIMATE ATTACK!"

I started tossing things into the cauldron, mumbling the command word which filled the cauldron with boiling liquid. I had orphan blood, spent uranium, demon wings, angel feathers, and a Record of Value. These were particularly hard to come by, but it would ensure the effect worked. Belial continued to run his mouth, "YES, YOU THOUGHT I COULDN'T CAST IT, BUT I KNOW THE LEGENDARY SPELL... WAIT, I SMELL SOMETHING FUNNY." Uh oh. He sniffed some more, "IT SMELLS OF SULFUR AND RADIATION AND BLOOD AND... AN ANTI-NEPHILIM RITUAL! BUT WHERE IS THAT SMELL COMING FROM?!?"

He looked around frantically until his eyes noticed me. They also noticed my containment circle. Double uh oh... He could disrupt this whole ritual if he attacked me now. And there was nothing I could do about it, because I had to stay still, burn things, and chant for ten more seconds for the spell to work. Ten. He cupped his hands together loosely. Nine. Energy began to build up rapidly. We were protected against elemental attacks to a large extent but this was a non-elemental attack. Eight. His hands uncupped and he had an Energy Ball as big as my entire body. Seven. He lifted it aloft. Six. He threw it, and my life started flashing before me. It wasn't much of one, one person made it worth living, and she was gone. Five. It flew past the strobe barrier. Four. It flew past the circle I had constructed and was fast heading for the table. And me. Three.

AZRAEL

While stuff like reversing spells is easy for someone like Yazim Jianne, some of my allies in the past have asked if I have a Reflect spell. I do. But I don't use it much. It's fine for Yazim Jianne, who can actually reverse time itself, but mine is too easy to counter. Granted what I do instead is not time reversal but spell reversal, but I typically never get the chance to use this. The element of surprise is lacking if I try, and I also have a somewhat useless window for casting that spell. It takes me about six or so seconds to cast a spell that I can only keep active about three seconds.

"*Reflect*!" I shouted, watching a bluish shield resembling a honeycomb surround Yazim Jianne, and diverted the Energy Ball launched at Belial. The effect was immediate, the spell bounced off as if it had been a tennis ball hit back with a racket. Belial was hit full-force with a concussive burst, and was knocked back, whacking against the outer edge or the circle that bound him in place.

YAZIM JIANNE

She had done it. She'd bought just enough time for me to use the Anti-Nephilim ritual, blasting Belial with some serious energy, enough to defeat him. But there was still one final form. For you see, Belial's vengeful spirit remained. And as it left the circle I had prepared, it was pissed. Its form shifted from a simple spirit to something deformed.

NEVRAS

This ghost wasn't just some silly poltergeist. Belial as a ghost had some serious power. He could become intangible, able to shrug off not only my physical attacks but even my techniques. He could become solid. And because his body was more like a cloud than a solid form, my Void attacks did not much more than the others. He also used a number of impressive attacks, like blasting Yazim Jianne's table to bits with lightning bolts, summoning blue flames to chase after all of us, or thick rings of dark elemental energy.

But it seemed like he was budgeting it. I wonder why... He barely used any mystic power to fight us. Rather than all those flashy attacks mostly he used ghost stuff. Weird. I decided not to think about that, but instead found myself watching various things. I tried a few attacks, but they just passed through. Elias used the Sunrise prayer, and managed to hit him, but as soon as it should have blown up his entire ghostly body, he just reformed again. Even Azrael's Exorcism didn't seem to work. I motioned to Ambrosia, "Hey, could you use the Aiken Crest? It lets you become solid or not, right? I need you to make him solid, while I test some things out." She did her thing, becoming incorporeal enough to resonate at the same frequency or whatever and touch him, then pulling him into the physical plane. "Great," she said, "now what?" I instructed her to just hold on, while I attacked the creepy looking spirit. It was easier said that done. The spirit may have formerly been soft as a cloud when we were trying to hit him, but he had sharp claws and teeth when he was solid. She had to keep adjusting her stance to keep herself from getting slashed or munched on. Meanwhile, I tried slashing this spirit with my sword, which should have caused the demon spirit to react violently, but instead he just bounced back. The same was true of using my techniques. I even tried the Void Slice to wipe it into nonexistence, but it was no good. "A vengeful spirit," Azrael noted, "these things can't be destroyed by physical force." The thing was vengeful alright, it was angry enough at us that finally trying to hold it steady failed, and it became blazing hot, breaking Ambrosia's grip. Huh, something strange just happened. Was it me, or did Belial shrink? I noticed this before when it was throwing all this fancy magic, but I didn't know what I was looking at back then. "Hey Azrael," I called out, "this thing is made of magic. Can you drain it somehow?" Azrael nodded, and called out, "*Deplete Magic*!" Belial's mystic power seeped out of him, and he visibly shrunk to half his size. "*Bind Incorporeality*!" she said. Belial became unable to become intangible, just as he did when Ambrosia touched him. I was able to try the one move I had yet to try. I cried, "*Silencing Stab*!" and I rushed forward to drive the point of my sword into him. The last of the demon's malevolent spirit was sucked away with its magic.

BOOK II ENDING 1

In which Ambrosia has a lot of free time.

AMBROSIA

Belial had at last been defeated. His body had been pulverized to an evil spirit and a bag of bones, and then the spirit had been drained of its potency. "**Yay!** He's dead!" I shouted with joy. All of a sudden though, I felt something weird. You know, you're watching a movie and there's something scratched up with the video and it skips? Anyway, that's what seemed to happen, there was a sort of ripple, and the villain disappeared from stage like a frame stopping. "What just happened? Guys, what do you think...?" I looked around. Nevras was gone too. So were the others. "Guys??? What happened? You're... gone. Why?" And then everything fell apart.

BEYOND THE WORLD

And then everything fell apart. The space around Ambrosia fell away completely leaving only openness. Where before there were walls and ceilings, chandeliers, and other such trappings, now there was only white empty space. Ambrosia looked around, and saw the floating triangular form of God. *I believe I can answer that*, God said to her. As she watched however, the recognized form of God fell away, and Ambrosia stared at her own face, identical except for clothing. She carried a long robe and a stylized staff tipped with

the Trinity symbol. “Or, should I say,” she said in actual words, “I believe I can.” Unlike Ambrosia, God looked more intense. Her eyes had the soul of the universe.

The Jews believed God was One, yet they made a distinction between God as Creator and themselves. To them, declaring God is with us, that one was Son of God, was the height of blasphemy. God spoke in Ambrosia's voice, and to all intents and purposes was showing Ambrosia her true self. If Ambrosia was shocked, she didn't really show it much. “You're me? But...” she sighed, “oh, nevermind. After evil twins, nothing surprises me anymore.” And indeed, Ambrosia did not look overly surprised.

God shrugged, “You should be at least a **little** surprised. After all, this will be hard to take at first. You've heard, I gather, about the First Oracle?” She had heard some legends so she recited from memory, “Of course. The Oracle completed his training and then went off to face Belial, but he disappeared and...” But then something occurred to her. A dawning realization came to her that something about that story was deeply wrong. She remembered the earlier events when she said, “He **ceased** to exist! Don't tell me what Belial was trying to get me to believe earlier was true?” God shook her head, which felt strange after seeing God for so long in only triangular form, “No. But here's what I'm telling you. The First Oracle disappeared because he saw what all Oracles see, that human existence is a Dream. It's time for us to Awaken.” Images suddenly flooded into Ambrosia's head of herself as God before even time existed. How she invented all sorts of stories to keep her company, and even developed video games for herself to play long before humans (especially *Zelda* and *Okami*), but watching stories of people she made up was no good. Real people were important, not something on a screen.

Yet still, despite these images, Ambrosia asked, “Awaken, what do you mean?” And God said, “Very well, I shall tell you the story of my life.” As she spoke, more images returned to Ambrosia's mind. God told her story, “I awoke in the midst of the Void. I was not created by the Void, for existence and nothing both persist. For awhile, I wanted just to go back to sleep, being inert like the Void all around me. But unlike humans, I knew instinctively I existed.” Seeing that everything she knew about the world was wrong, and now understanding that other people's notion of their own existence was wrong, she was truly confused. “I don't understand,” she asked, “what makes someone exist?” God had a ready answer, “Love. When you become aware of things outside yourself, you exist to them. And vice versa.” She continued, “The Void could not itself love anyone, but through it, I began to experience love by making creations of my own.” Ambrosia remembered grasping the Void, and weaving it into stuff to keep her company. But it was never enough for her loneliness. She felt her connection with the Void because it too had nobody and nothing, since it *was* nothing. It was *not good* for her to be alone.

God continued some more, “The Void is never one thing in particular, so it could be forged into anything. But nothing made from it lasts, as all things return to the Void. I began to realize that I existed to create others, and because I existed, the Void loved me. My first creation was truly horrible, they were soulless robots crafted by my hands. They could neither love nor hate, nor did they have any desires. So I discarded them as a failed creation. Like humans, I could sleep, so I dreamed of this world and the humans in it. They were just as I wanted, only they weren't real. But... But... now it's time for you to become part of me, and for us to wake up!” Ambrosia saw herself working on robots and then smashing them apart with a sledgehammer. And then Ambrosia saw death. Not as living things see it, but to see it from a perspective of an eternal deity. To explain it would be like explain sight to a blind person, so different was this experience from anything a mortal encountered in their daily life.

She remembered the stone tablets in Atlantis, and how they depicted not only herself sleeping but the image of someone molding sand. No wonder humans were so prone to dying, they were like sand sculptures which take hours to make, toppled by the waves, and then rebuilt again. The Afterlife humans had was still nothing more than a desperate hope for friends to remain. She saw that all of these attempts to interact with humans, to appear among them, and eventually her attempt to be born as one of them were simply an attempt to feel close to others. She wanted to not be isolated. And as she looked around this white area of thoughts made manifest, she saw some of the stories in her collection. In *The Velveteen Rabbit*, the book ended with the doctor ordering the bunny destroyed.

It's a pretty dark book actually, without any kind of happy ending. God liked it mainly because she dreamed that one day, someone would be able to write a real ending to it.

God proved to be an endless barrel of exposition, "It's sad. But this world can never be! I need to return to my life, and you are more than just my daughter. You are me! I became a human child to experience this life as one of these humans, and you were born." Ambrosia fumed, "**Hold it** just a second! I have a man in my life that I love, can't you do something?" God shook her head, "I wish I could. Believe me when I tell you that I love him too. But I can't see any way. These humans are doomed to fade out of existence." Ambrosia sighed, a long deep sigh filled with regret and doomed experiences. "I guess there's nothing that can be done," she declared at last.

"You realize this is a fate worse than death right? You'll be stuck as God for all eternity, with nobody but yourself," Ambrosia's shadow self proclaimed. Ambrosia nodded, "It doesn't matter. This is the truth, You can't escape yourself. So I've decided. If I can't find anyone to love, I'll love myself. I'll let everything else return to nothing." And so, everything faded away as Ambrosia embraced the truth of her solitude. Loving oneself was the key to harmonious life, but only because other people tend to like those who are happy and confident. When one is alone, they have to like the idea of isolation.

AMBROSIA

I tried to do just that. Really, I tried. I spent time reading books and manga, dreaming up mountains to climb or rivers to paddle across, and trying to like myself and to treat myself well. But an eternity eventually grates on you, and despite having all the time in the world to try different things, I began to feel sad. It felt like such a waste, really.

I had just finished a 18-hour Turner Classic Movies marathon without any announcer, just actors (actors aren't real people), only to switch it off in disgust. I thought about this vacuum my life now had, for I had no man in my life, nor any child, nor did I have friends. I had abandoned all of that because it was a fantasy, to live in a world where all I had left were the fantasies of movies and books. And so, I picked up this book, *Oracle of Tao*, and began to read. I had read for hours before coming to the ending, when I decided to pick up a pen and scratch out where it said, ~~Ambrosia sighed, a long deep sigh filled with regret and doomed experiences. "I guess there's nothing that can be done," she declared at last~~. I had an ending to rewrite.

BOOK II ENDING 2

In which Ambrosia becomes a little bit pregnant.

AMBROSIA

I was back again in white empty space. I listened to my other self's explanation. Considering I had gone back to the very beginning, I decided to play along so as not to freak my God-self out. But then, she probably knew everything I was thinking anyway, so we were probably both playing along, saying preset lines as though the other had heard them the first time. It was like being inside a video game you wrote the script for.

She got to the end of her speech. Remembering the consequences of my earlier decision, I was determined to change it. Thinking quickly, I said, "Perhaps there is a way to do it." She nodded. It was her story too, so she wanted to change it too. I improvised, "You gave birth to me, right? I heard of Jesus in Kushiyama sacrificing for the whole world. If he can die, why can't I give life? I want the whole earth, every man and woman, every soul and every object, as my child. I should be pregnant with Nevras's child as of last week, but until he exists, it isn't real. I want his child, but more, I want him to be real. All the quarrels and bad times are nothing to the prospect of him never **being** there...You can do this, right?" I was crying, something I almost never did before merging with Evil Ambrosia and gaining the Tao. Damn those emotions! Then her face brightened, "I think I can! What I'll do won't be a true pregnancy, but I think I know a magic ritual."

In another reality, the me who became God was writing furiously, trying to change her destiny to something that didn't suck. I could see it happening as if looking around a corner from a mirror...

The book suddenly exploded with energy and its contents refused to stay on the page. The mountains described in Chapter 2 suddenly sprang out of the page. The deserts from when we visited near Seikai and Goji similarly formed all around us, and the magic... people read fantasy novels, yet refused to believe such things are real. Yet the runes formed, spreading thick in the air, knitting together reality, for real this time. Before, things existed as a dream, a sort of glamour painted over the white emptiness. But this time, everything was created around this other me, leaving an egg-shaped bubble. The ending of two books changed that day, *Oracle of Tao* and the *Velveteen Rabbit*. The Void and the white space began to mix together, fertilizing the egg, then the other Ambrosia faded as time had been changed. She became me.

At the same time, God came inside me. Literally. She (I?) changed to her geometric floating triangle pattern, and transformed further into light, entering inside my body and disappearing. And then I felt my stomach grow heavy. "I can feel it coming forth! Everything's inside of me, waiting to be born!" I said. I felt nausea, then the sensation of something growing inside of me. It felt less like a baby, though, and more like a presence more spiritual than physical, and yet no less painful. The entire process happened without time, for this place remained eternal. So I felt the pains of an entire nine-month pregnancy in mere moments. I pushed, and out came... well, everything.

I stood again with God, but this time, I could see outside the emptiness. ***I was not alone***. Time was stopped, so I stepped back into my former body and rejoined the flow of time. I heard God's words in my head, *Good luck with your life, Ambrosia. When this ends, you will be a normal girl and must tell nothing of this experience. Being God and knowing this would probably make it impossible for you to live your life with Nevras everyday.* I felt the pains of another pregnancy, this one just starting with Nevras.

He looked at me, confused. "Ambrosia," he asked, "what just happened? Right after Belial died, it felt like I blacked out for a second." I told him, "I saw God," then muttered to myself, "I was God." Nevras looked at me curiously, "Hmmm? What did God say to you then?" I knew exactly what God said, and I knew the truth. But there was no way I was talking about that. So I decided to lie. "It's weird. I can't remember much. I witnessed something that God didn't want me to remember," I stalled for time, being as vague as possible, "but whatever it was, I felt like I saved something. And then he left me with a few words..." I paused for effect while I thought of something profound to say. He finally became kinda impatient, "Geez, Ambrosia, you know how to make a guy wait! What did he say?" In the end, I said something that just seemed to sound natural. I said, "God told me I was losing my powers, because it would interfere with me having a normal life. And when I asked what happened in those moments I forgot, all he said was, 'We are all Children of God.'" It was true of course, but he hadn't said that to me.

Somehow or other, we made it to the New Earth, only to find things felt totally different. Nevras and I got married, and the others went their separate ways for now. It seemed, for now, that our adventure was finally over...

Book III
Family Matters

CHAPTER 1

In which Ambrosia finds she has a bratty kid

AMBROSIA

Nine years passed. After defeating Belial, I settled down, married Nevras, and had a nice quiet life on the farm. The Void had closed, and the world was at peace, mostly. We had a girl, who Nevras ended up doing a lot of the raising for, since I was still too much of a tomboy. Still, it seems like some of me rubbed off on her, so she was truly a child I was proud of. As we were enjoying our life together, events were happening around us that were most troubling. I had retired, so my powers had returned to the Oracles.

ESTHERIEL

It has all been according to my plan! The Realm of Void has reverted to its proper place and Belial has been put out of his misery. Soon goodness will consume everything! Mwahahaha!!! *cough* Ugh, that was terrible. I guess people who want good to conquer shouldn't do evil laughs, huh?

I stood in midair overlooking the Earth, with my wings flapping to stay aloft and fixed in orbit. As you readers of this account may know, I recently left Heaven since God would do nothing to stop humans from suffering under the evil of Belial. Although I had left him, he refused to do the same. He interrupted my thoughts. *Absolute good is not ideal*, God said, *You need to give humans free will.* I had had enough. "**Silence**!" I snarled... I mean, I spoke sweetly, "I will replace you! My will shall become the Will of God, and all who do evil in my sight will be punished!" Although I only saw God's body as a mass of three floating triangles, I could tell that God's head shook. *You shall wither and perish like leaves on a tree. Of angels, you shall be...* God paused for dramatic effect, *Mortal!!!!!!!*

AMBROSIA

I thought it was over, but fate was to give me one more duty. As I slept, living with the knowledge that I was God meant that I now had a sort of secondary connection with God's life. If God was just chilling out doing nothing, this didn't mean much. But if God said something or saw something happening or did something, it was like a big toe moved. I knew about it. And whenever I slept, I became God. Just now, I pronounced that sentence on that angel. I didn't watch God do it, I was literally inside God's weird Triune body and he let me say anything I wanted. Of course, my actions have consequences. That overkill acting where I took an angel's immortality, for example.

I awoke in my bed. Nevras and I had bought a small mansion near Opening with the help of my father-in-law, thanks to a prize for beating Cthulhu. But we had to sell that one and move closer to Phoenix because of certain circumstances, so the new one was much less impressive. We also tried and failed to renovate the house, so the second one had some shabby spots. It was a small one-acre farm made mostly of straw and sticks, and any big bad wolf could blow that sucker down right away. Thanks to the (quite literal) magic of runes and spacial distortion, the house despite its L-shape instead was a large square room, which after doing a bit of carpentry work, we put up a small dividing wall for the bedroom for privacy. The front door, however, emptied into the bedroom, so its privacy was... limited. The bedroom had two beds. There's our bed which has a proper frame, two mattresses, a set of eight pillows, all the fancy embroidered stuff that I've already forgotten the name of (and which we spent four minutes every day making). On the other hand, Tamashii has a simple futon mattress, no frame, no nothing, a rag of a blanket, and gets ornery whenever I suggest maybe it's time to get a new bed. I guess she thinks having a nice bed would make her too complacent, because she's always talking about going out on a great adventure like how we did. I nag her some to keep it made, but it usually ends up messed up every morning. The rest of that room has Nevras's weapon collection in a small arsenal basket, and there's a Glow Orb nearby. I'd like to say that this was also a gift from Nevras's family but it wouldn't be true. They have one in their castle, but along with their mirror, and their collection of First Materials (most of

which were stolen by that merchant) they are too costly to replace easily. They gave us this house and the beds, but the Glow Orb was straight from the laboratory of Yazim Jianne. This was his original, after the one that caused the … incident with his wife, and he finally got to the point where he made them again after years of trauma. Poor guy. I think he's still living in Opening. We should visit some time.

In the rest of the house is the kitchen, and the... bathroom to the far right of the house. The bathroom is a wood frame around a hole in the ground. Well, technically, it is a toilet, but it's a crude one that empties straight down when the handle is pulled. Nevras arranged some straw below, and imported some mycozoe, which wander around after consuming our ummm, waste, and turn it into high quality soil. It's embarrassing, but we don't have to send it to any sewage plants. Oh yes, that's right. The world today has water purification, as we've kinda hit an industrial revolution of sorts now that alchemy has managed to break through a certain point, not to mention the way enchantment works now. First Materials are more widely available nowadays, so at the alchemical end, chemical reaction are easier to do. When the Universe Egg formed, the way reality works changed. Elias explained it as the New Earth kinda becoming more of a spiritual world. Everything nowadays feels more symbolic. Like, ummm, a bottle of water is still water, but it kinda tastes more like water. Or something.

Since I am God now I understand this process, whereas before I would need Elias to explain it. But since I can't explain it easily, I'll borrow one of his expressions. There's some cave that Plato came up with, and there's people chained to the wall of the cave. But in the First Universe (AKA the Void Realm), everything is made in its true image. First Material always repairs itself since it's basically the absolute blueprint of all we petty mortals see. This means it's possible to chop a branch of a tree, and have First Wood from the tree regrow. In the old New Earth, First Material was only found when it was torn from the Void Realm, but now the Void left the surface of the Void Realm, and it became like an ozone layer, allowing the area to become the First Universe again. Alchemists went crazy when they discovered this, and arranged mining and logging expeditions. It was like killing the goose that laid golden eggs if they just took stuff rather than cutting pieces off, so they had to be careful though.

We now have cement roads, advanced aqueducts, sulfuric hot springs, with the addition of First Ice, refrigeration that doesn't involve unraveling time, though many people still do it that way. It doesn't use electricity, although now with the lightning harvesters, that's what many people have too. So now, toilets and sinks are piped using First Iron, and flush water downhill through a largely simple mechanism, where it is filtered by First Carbon before getting sent back out. Even before talking about enchantments, chemical reactions of all sorts create the modern world we know of today. But that's not what happens with us.

We get the water for crops from a series of water pumps. The pumps are made from elven, which along with its anti-creature properties, it turns out has some interesting water purification abilities. We have a large table for eating on, a stone and brick chimney with a skillet nearby, and a big cauldron which used to be Elias's that I am currently using to make curry. Hanging off to the right of the chimney is a stone cutting board, and a First Iron knife. I still use it, only now I cut veggies with it. I've taken to using the Fire Ring to start fires and put them out, the second is harder to do with a roaring fire, but keeps the ring from powering out. To the left of that is a small shelf filled with herbs and spices, which doesn't seem to be in any sort of order. To the left of that is a shelf filled with bed things, such as extra pillows and blankets. To the left of that is what looks like a broom. Actually, it's the fishing pole that I discovered was made of Conception, which reforms to be any farm tool I want. I just used it last as a broom.

Outside the house, carrots, onions, and cabbage are being farmed. We have a small forest and lake to the east. And we have a scarecrow that Tamashii named Mister Zuran. On the floor of our house are cheap harlequin novels, and kimchi. We eat kimchi and fish for most breakfasts. My adopted parents taught me to eat it, and now that I have a farm, that's what we're eating. The books... are mine. Don't judge me!

The breakfast table is occupied by two people already, my husband and my daughter. Nevras's hair has grown out over the last few years. He was initially worried about how

he looked when I met him, so as you know he had the whole heavy padded armor making him look muscular and such.. But as we spent time together as a married couple, he agreed to drop the whole manly man act. Nevras is a narrow waist, wide hips, and a small body in general. He now has two sets of clothes, one set is undersized male clothing and the other is for when Nevras feels kinda sexy. I encouraged him to grow his hair out. When Nevras feels more masculine, he combs it out straight, otherwise it goes into a braid. Tamashii's pretty understanding of this, and doesn't let anyone talk bad about her dad. As far as Tamashii is concerned, Nevras is Dad and Second Mom.

Tamashii. Our daughter of nine, with her adorable purple hair in a long ponytail, at the head of the table munching on some weird meal that she had made herself. Most kids at nine don't know how to cook properly, but it seems she was always in a rush to learn everything. We took good care of her to the best of my knowledge, but ever since she was about six, she had a drive to see new sights, to try new things. It won't be too much longer before she wants to set out on her own adventure.

TAMASHII

Hey there. My name is Tamashii. Tamashii Rinne Brahman, Rinne after some Reaper gal that Mom swears she saw when she was wandering around and accessed some placed she shouldn't. So, I'm new here and everything, but let me tell you what's up. I know you won't believe me but I'm kinda psychic and also super-smart for my age. You know that whole childhood amnesia thing? Didn't really have it. At about two days old, I had this weird event. It was like a seizure, only it also gave me heart palpitations. They thought I was going into cardiac arrest. And I started bleeding through my eyes. At the end of all of it, they said that all of the windows in the building I was examined smashed to bits from a powerful psychokinetic burst. After that, I suddenly was fully able to talk, walk, swim, and everything else with no stupid toddler stumbling around phase. At one year, I could read any book, so I convinced my parents to take me to visit the Great Library. I had learned everything from mathematics up to just before trigonometry. I had studied medicine, architecture, economics, and when my peers were learning to like dinosaurs, I knew the diet and lifestyle of ***V. mongoliensis***, as well as its date and area of discovery.

But as smart as I am, as powerful as I am, it comes with a price. You see, I'll never be normal. All of the kids my age are playing with dolls, or talking to each other about normal things for their age, while I... well, let's just say I shatter dolls just by touching them the wrong way, and I'm probably more able to talk to people in their teens. But what teen wants to hang out with a nine year old? In other words, even if only intellectually, I could likely hold any job by age 2, I seemed to be emotionally stunted, just past the autistic stage. I'd stare too much. I had a self-centered way of speaking. I was outright rude to some people, and most importantly, I was all alone outside my family and their friends. I enjoyed talking to Elias, but well, he and Aqorm used to be kind of a thing, and she started to glare at me every now and then like she was jealous of something.

And it got worse. Just as I thought maybe I'd have to dumb down myself to fit in, just when I believed I was already enough of a freak, my powers developed. It started when Mom was cutting wood. Her hand slipped, and she got a nasty cut on her wrist. They were gonna take her to the emergency room when I hugged her close, and suddenly the pain was gone. The wound was gone. People were mixed between deciding that I was a witch or something, and lining up for the famous miracle child. Oh yes, I got around some people then, but these weren't what you'd call healthy social interactions. And then came the jealous children. I eventually learned that not only could I do Healing, but I also had the power of Empathy. I could transfer wounds, and it worked both ways. I couldn't use it to bully anyone, but when I was concerned for someone I could take their wounds. If I was afraid of someone, I could give them my wounds. You can imagine, children annoyed at everything I could do, kicking or punching me... only to have my blows healed and all of my bruises and pain went to them. They predictably ran home to their parents, who decided to make an example of me. Only, it didn't work that way. Even if they threw rocks at me, I simply transferred the pain away from me. By about age 6, they came after us with torches and pitchforks as a whole town.

It was around this time King Charis decided to build us a house on the outskirts of

Phoenix. We even planted a forest around it so people wouldn't be able to find us easily. They didn't. Ever since then, my parents have done their best to shelter me from people who might hurt me as I developed more psychic abilities. I understand, and I love them for it. But even so, I can't help want some sort of adventure, much like they had. Little did I know that this very day, I was to get my wish.

It started innocently enough. I released my phoenix this morning to go feed itself. We got this phoenix called Suzaku a long time ago, but sent it to the Aiken monastery for the Druids to watch after. Phoenixes were mostly self-feeding and in fact refused to coddled by others, but they did appreciate affection. "Cawww caww," it said. It flew out the window, to return later. Phoenixes always came back, even if they died.

So here I was, calmly eating my *siri paya* (don't ask, you squeamish people) and my mom came up to me and told me flatly, "Make your bed. It's a mess!" There wasn't any exasperation in her voice, despite that this was a regular occurrence. To be clear, it's not really that I'm a slob. I didn't have a good bed and somehow ruin it, I insisted on this no-frills bed because I didn't want to get too attached to home. If I saw my bed at home as messy and not terribly comfortable, I would have an incentive to move out. It was an easy matter to fold the blanket neatly under the mattress, fold it neatly over, center the blanket, and lay my pillows evenly across the bed. As my prerogative as a nine-year-old, I whined, "Awwww... Do I have to?" She nodded, without much reaction. Mom did love me, but she was sorta deadpan about it, and she knew when I was faking it. On my way back, I noticed Dad acting weird. Weirder than usual I mean, Dad sometimes was Second Mom, after all. But this was like he was possessed.

She had barely got the words out, "Good morning, love. What's our plan today?" Then it happened, his eyes got weirdly focused, and his voice was more serious than I had ever seen him in my company. Also, his mouth didn't appear to be moving. He said, *Ambrosia, you must not make the mistake of resting on your laurels.* My mom, more than a bit surprised asked him, "Ummm, Nevras, what's wrong with you? You sound weird."

In movies, sometimes you'll see some kind of special effects when this sort of thing happens. Pretty much, whatever you're imagining right now, we pretty much knew from all the weird lighting effects that Nevras was allowing God to speak through him. Just don't ask me to explain it. I'm just a kid.

He said, *I am speaking through the heart of Nevras. I exist within all hearts, after all.* Mom sighed, "Not again... I thought I retired. I even lost my powers!" He responded, *Yes, I believed it would interfere with your pursuit of a normal life to have unfathomable cosmic powers at all times. You will, of course need to regain them.* She sighed even more if possible, "Could you at least tell me who I'm to stop this time? Some demon again?" He shook his head, *Actually, it is one of my angels named Estheriel. She wants to rule the Heavens.* She looked confused, "So one of your angels has turned like Lucifer, and wants to overthrow you?"

He clarified, *You misunderstand. She is too good. She is a zealot, who wants me to eliminate all evil from the universe.* She asked, "That sounds good to me. What's the problem?" God exposited for some time at this, *The Oracle of Tao would understand better than most, but still you are human. Good is good only because evil exists. If humans are not given free will, they are puppets. Just as you could have at any point abandoned this quest as impossible, or pursued your dreams, you wouldn't have been a powerful force for balance had you not had the decision to become the Oracle on your own, without darkness, humans cannot grow in opposition. So, will you carry out my will on Earth?* Now, you would think most heroes of stories jump at the chance for adventures, but she started shaking her head vigorously. That is, until I shouted, "She does, she does!" And God said, *Very well. I will return your loved one's body to you now.* Dad's voice returned to normal, and he looked dazed as he asked, "What were you saying? I blanked out for a second." All Mom had to say was, "...Remember nine years ago?" He groaned, quoting the Godfather film, "Another one? Just when I thought I was out, they pull me back in! Alright then, if you're going, I want to go." I leaned on my Dad, knowing he was a soft touch, "Heeeey, can I come too? I missed out on the last one." The concern showed in his face, but since he couldn't say no to me, he said, "Ummm, talk to your mother?" Mom glared at him.

Ugh. Mom would probably leave me at King Charis, I mean Grandpa's house. So I did

my very best puppy eyes. “If you two are going on another adventure, I wanna come!” She looked at me for quite a while, and then, apparently deciding leaving me somewhere alone, only to die in battle would be far more traumatizing than having me die not long after, so she gave in. She nodded, “Well, I guess since you've finished all your chores, you can come.” I said, “Yay!!!” Yes, I know, precocious child that I am, I still utter the words 'yay' from time to time. I wrote a note in ancient Chinese to Suzaku telling it that we would be out for possibly weeks or months, and it should stay at Aiken monastery until we came to pick it up again. She paused, “Oh, and one more thing.” I had no time to even ask what it was before she pulled out her knife and cut my ponytail straight off. Dude! Messing with people's hair isn't cool. Anyway. It was adventure time.

AMBROSIA

Starting an adventure the second time is very different, after you've settled down and had kids. As we wandered out, we saw a few of our island's many creatures. The majestic centaurs, the ridiculously weak strawmen, the tricksy fairies, and the dreaded leafy bunny were all still in attendance, even though many things about the world had changed.

Michael, apparently had a child with Lilith, but seems to resent her for some reason. Michael is the natural parent of the first Seraphim in millennia. But it feels like I missed some details. This girl is named Portia, and is probably more powerful than any of us. She's got the cutest red hair, and seems to worship Tamashii. What a nice friend!

Lilith and Aqorm have a half-demon child themselves, and they seem happy now that they are honest about their relationship. Their little girl is kind of interesting looking, blond hair and light skin, she has elf ears and has no wings or horns or tail, but those claws of hers... And those teeth are impressive. And her eyes are such a pretty shade of red. She's beautiful, but I wonder what life will be like having her parents. Her name's Sastraneth, but everyone just calls her Sastra. Whenever someone tries to pick on Tamashii, she basically has taken to being her bodyguard. At around Tamashii's age, she's already thinking about boys her age though, I wonder about her future...

Elias is a godfather now, and he told me the last time we met that he fully plans to write a novel of these events someday. I just hope he doesn't decide that he knows what I'm thinking, and write those parts!

I would like to say that I know more about what’s going on with everyone. But the truth was, we had lost touch with many of our friends. While their kids visited, they had gotten busy with their own lives. They’d lost touch. And we were no better. Our lives had been in a rut for the last few years, and our marriage needed some adventure too.

Outside our local life, Jesus Christ had taken the seat in Council for Kushiyama, and as such, many people expected him to usher in some sort of utopia. It's pretty much a known that everyone has an idea that Jesus is on their side and against their enemies. I mean, come on, even the Koreans have paintings of Jesus. The liberals all see Jesus as some sort of champion of socialism by confusing widespread voluntary charity with state-run obligatory welfare, the conservatives take his request for his disciples to buy a sword to its logical extreme and somehow have him coexist with the likes of Ayn Rand, women make him champion of feminism, and so on. But Jesus is on everyone's side, except those who saw sides in the first place like the Pharisees. He did little to change the nature of the Council, except to soften those who were so set in their ways that they were sabotaging what it was capable of. The Council, with his help, was still an anarchist world government; however, some of its hypocrisy was reduced. They did less to interfere in the lives of the citizens, they did less to tax or oppress the poor, they did more to genuinely provide justice. With the aid of effective screening, the peasantry came to the Council to tell their grievances, and had much greater of a say in how their countries were run than ever before. Ultimately though, the Council was all but disbanded. Jesus convinced the Council that the Council's presence on this world was simply too much like the State, which they had seen firsthand during their fall, so unless there was an actual threat, they rarely met together anymore, preferring to deal with issues of their own town. Individual and local concerns now trumped global ones.

Not only was the Council changed, but the world itself. After I kinda sorta got pregnant with the universe, the Universe Egg floated above the New Earth, as a reminder

that existence was now a real thing. Not that anyone besides me knew what it was. In fact, the population generally thought that it had always been there.

Pregnancy had no pain, since inside the body, new life was formed of energy rather than matter, only taking on matter outside the body. Tamashii was born in this way, she just exited as a ball of light, then a moment later she had a body. I'd like to also say that no animals were eaten any more either, and that we were vegetarians like in the vision of Revelation. But kinda like the whole wanting to have oceans, there were people from Texas. So, yeah this wasn't happening, although now meat trees had been growing, along with fish of every kind, goats that could regrow after being eaten (so long as their bones were fine), and the Tree of Life now grew in seven locations besides Heaven itself. Even though many things were better, the world is always in balance, so those seven places were basically horrible ordeals. Hell now had demons with souls. As such, because it was still a miserable place where pain existed in high amounts, it was becoming a tourist destination, much to the chagrin of its ruler. The downside of all this was that a high human population was needed to qualify for Council seats, so this meant Satan, as overlord of Hell, could sit on Council along with Jesus. Not that he would, though.

There were a few other small changes since I helped make the world real. Like, the whole deal with enchantments tying off mystic power was no longer a thing. As such, magical items were becoming so widespread that people had taken to calling them magitech. The mechanism used to make it impractical for mass production. Now, as I understand it, the runes are carved on an object, and it's more like what computer coders call a reference or pointer. The enchantment doesn't have its own source of magic, but rather a pool to draw from made up of ambient runes of that type. This allows magical items that don't really release energy, like my calendar to be mass-produced. But it means fire swords run out of energy in a cave of ice. When I first became God, I upgraded any old enchantments to the new system, and taught humans how to do it. Since then, I haven't been involved. Unless someone prays for a miracle, I let the system run.

Not that most of this had much to do with me. I begin most days on my farm. My fishing pole, since it's made from Conception, I turned into farming tools. It made me feel good to be working with my hands and growing stuff. Even though, yeah, I wasn't as good at it as most of the population, who could grow stuff instantly. It was part of the drawbacks of being the Oracle. I was like other people in a lot of ways, but there were certain things that because of who I am, I simply cannot do.

You've heard the expression, “God loves everyone, but I'm his favorite”? Well, it's more like God **is** everyone, but I'm the one most like him, or something. God is the One and the Many. He can speak through people or temporarily take on human form. I used to think it was because of my destiny to have Oracle powers that I couldn't do regular magic. But it's simple. God can't pray to himself. In order to use thaumaturgy, I would have to be one of the regular people, not well, you know. Anyway...

Anyway, as usual, I'm off topic. As I say, we were starting out, and I was making sure Tamashii could handle herself, so I brought her to face some centaurs as a test. We took the boat over from our house to the island where Opening and Tsukuyomi Mountain were to do this. You know, the same centaurs that nearly killed Nevras, and we had no healer and I currently had no Oracle powers aside from my ability to dodge.

CHAPTER 2

In which Tamashii overcomes reckless parenting.

TAMASHII

My mom is usually much better about my safety than this. Honestly, I don't know what she was thinking. However, I guess I had to prove I could cut it in battle, so it was good to start somewhere. I needed to train, and creatures seemed scarce.

I adjusted my gloves. Gloves, you see, were the only weapon that I could reliably use. This was because of my psychometry. Whenever I touched something with my bare hands, I was at risk of picking up impressions. I would remember where a tool had been, who the original owners were, some of their memories, and everything they saw. This

meant that I would have obsessive-compulsive thoughts that unsettled me, such as touching knives and hearing a voice telling me that it needed to cut flesh and feel blood all around it. Since I had no desire to either be creeped out or go on a psychotic cutting rampage, I avoided most weapons like the plague and I had to avoid cutting my own food, instead resorting to eating with chopsticks. These gloves were a thick sturdy fabric that was thick enough to muffle such sensations and further covered with chainmail so that I could use it to fight. I rushed forward to punch.

But centaurs are horses after all. And so, they were in another spot by the time I got there. “Hey you,” I said, “come back!” I chased after it and was about to catch it, when my mom's fishing pole dragged me back. I glared at Mom, “What's the big idea? I totally had...” She pointed to the last spot I stood. There was an arrow embedded in the grass. “He was baiting you,” she said, “running away and then going to draw an arrow on you when you rushed in. Luckily we noticed in time. Now, if you wanna keep practicing, the first thing to remember is keep aware. Don't let them hurt you!”

Sobered by nearly getting run through by a missile weapon, I advanced towards it by dodging to the left or right occasionally. I made to where it was intact, but it tried to flee. But this time, the centaur reared up in alarm as it got surrounded by my parents all of a sudden. I faced it down, and gave it a one-two punch, followed by a kick.

Perhaps you forgot. I do have metal-lined gloves and such, but I kinda am a kid, and a callow youth at that. Perhaps with some experience this would change but for now, I hit as hard as an average nine year old. It barely bruised the creature.

I refused to give up though. I would become stronger! And so, I launched into a series of punches and kicks, moving around as I did to avoid being in one place for its arrows to shoot. I was so expecting the centaur to draw its bow, when I got directly behind it, that I didn't even remember that its lower body is that of a horse. And horses tend to kick.

I had just enough time to put up a Shield, turning what might have been a deadly kick for someone like me into something that merely knocked me back a few feet into the air and covered my body in bruises. “Tamashii!” Mom screamed, “Are you all right?!?” I groaned, getting up after a few moments. I nodded, “I'm okay. But it kinda hurts!” I'd need some more training in martial arts I guess. For now, I had to remember that I did have other abilities. I was a Soulfire, after all.

I'm sure you've heard people try to explain what a Soulfire is, using the words “psychic” or similar. But that's only partially accurate. Actually, everyone is a psychic, we're all souls trapped inside flesh bodies. It's just... most people can't withstand giving off large amounts of energy. Telepathy starts to give most people seizures or hallucinations, Pyromancy tends to rapidly dehydrate the body and eventually causes spontaneous combustion, Telekinesis and many of the others start the magnetize the blood and give massive issues like nosebleeds to actually having the brain explode in extreme cases. Think of it like being exposed to radiation for normal people, then exposed when your entire body is made of lead. Only this is not really accurate, because the real secret to a Soulfire's resistance is actually their genetic resistance to psionic alteration. I had good blood, that wouldn't magnetize, freeze, burn, or otherwise react to use of my own powers, and I had the ability for my muscles, skin, and bones to hold up to the strain of high-energy use. I couldn't explode my brain, I couldn't spontaneously combust, and I wouldn't get hallucinations or seizures, no much how much power I used. I could get nosebleeds or lose consciousness, but I would need to be using much more than normal power, and my powers would typically adjust so the same level of power wasn't a problem, similar to trying to lift 80 lb one time, and later being able to lift 250 lb after muscle training. My spiritual “muscles” were such that I could now lift about a 580 lb boulder without much help. And that's what I did, sensing underground rocks and pulling on up, then throwing it at the speed of a bullet. The rock shattered against the centaur, splitting into fine dust The centaur on the other hand, was crushed completely into liquid, fur, skin, and bones by a huge object thrown at such speed. I grimaced. Next time, I just wanted to fight something, not completely take it apart.

Perhaps I should explain some of my powers before we get too far into this battle. As I say, Soulfire powers are psionic, and divided into a number of categories like Telekinesis, Pyromancy, Healing, Shielding, and Empathy although there are some minor

subcategories. Telepathy for instance gets subdivided into Dream Reading, Mind Reading, and Mood Reading. Mind Reading is pretty limited, you can't just pull out deep secrets from people's minds. I can only read shared surface thoughts or hear other telepathic conversations nearby. So if Portia suddenly shapeshifted into a boy named Bakamaru (that's pretty specific, I dunno why I thought of that name or that scenario, honestly), I would have no way of knowing unless she directed her thoughts toward me. Mood Reading lets you see people's moods as colors. You can tell for instance when a person has no interest in you (gray) or when they love you (full color) or when they are angry, happy, jealous, afraid, or sad. But it takes some training to remember these colors. Right now though, the yellow surrounding the other centaurs was pretty clear. They were freaked out. Creatures never expect to fight humans.

Psionic power doesn't use runes, just psychic effort, so it cannot be dispelled, it cannot be ruined by the rain, and it works just fine in an area of antimagic that dispels everything else. The other difference though was that while Ambrosia's friend Zoe could use a fire spell as far as it could travel, usually curving at the horizon or hitting something, my psychic powers were very strong, but very limited. You see, a Soulfire has a **territory**. Inside this territory, I basically have the power to warp reality itself. I could make little streamers of light, I could turn green grass into a swamp or a desert, I could heal or shield myself, and I could move stuff around. But even one foot away from the edge of my territory, I can do absolutely nothing, making my powers mostly defensive. A typical Soulfire gradually gains territory while their power quickly increases, so I'd probably be at my full territory as a teen or adult, and keep it until old age. Also, while antimagic didn't work against my powers, magical shields exerted territory of their own, and could at least defend against my powers. Or maybe I had it backwards, and antimagic could work but shields didn't. I hadn't been in a lot of battles against thaumaturgy masters, so I couldn't tell you. I haven't been in many battles period, honestly, except against people with farm tools. Fighting people is generally something I've tried to avoid.

I did know, though, that unlike spells of antimagic or shields, I definitely did have a problem around atheists, since their reality tended to strongly reject mine. I also had to worry about other Soulfires engaging in "territory disputes" if they stood in the same area as me. I guess, you could think of it as visiting a theme park and having the memories how it was every year, but taking a child with you this year, and noticing subtle changes like the ticket price and some of the attractions.

A couple of the centaurs fled. The remaining centaurs fired on them for cowardice, but despite some getting taken down, about two or three managed to get away. Even if I had the taste for killing fleeing creatures, they were outside of my territory. On the other hand, the other six decided to step right in. "You two stay back," I warned, and they knew about how far to back off. My current territory was about 20 yards in a circle (including underground), although I suspected it would not be long before it expanded to 30 yards. The first centaur galloped towards me, drawing his bow and firing. Normally, a fast projectile would be too much for a caster of magic, because they had to focus runes in the air and work them into a spell. This meant a wonder-worker had to either set up a shield or have a spell already ready in case they were fired on. On the other hand, with just Telekinesis, I could lock a fired arrow in place and turn it back upon the person firing it. The reason was simple. Zeno's Paradox of the Arrow states that, "If everything when it occupies an equal space is at rest, and if that which is in locomotion is always occupying such a space at any moment, the flying arrow is therefore motionless." That is, each second, the arrow is motionless, therefore if there are like an infinite number of seconds in which the arrow is motionless, motion cannot happen. This approach was totally different from how most Telekinesis worked, which still involved momentum, but as I learned to use my power, I learned that I could apply bizarre theoretical rules of physics, and defy them as well. So I used this principle to stop the arrow in mid-flight, turned it around, and made momentum and motion reassert themselves suddenly, giving a very small push with my Telekinesis to assist its already high kinetic energy. The first of the six centaurs died off. I used my Telekinesis to push the second of these back, but he charged forward again. So I lit a fire under him, and shaped it into a spiral of flame. While I could also toss fireballs, this was far more accurate and had less chance of

immolating random forest creatures like foxes. The last four all surrounded me to try to attack at once. Looking around and seeing nothing besides them inside my territory, I used my Pyromancy less to create fire so much as to generate a solid sphere of pure energy. Basically, it was like an explosion came out of my body, and it was about the lowest power version of this effect. The combination of heat and force instantly destroyed such creatures. I sighed. My power was great, but I overdid it again. Those centaurs were just minding their own business when I brutalized and killed much of their tribe. Some of these poor centaurs were even giving milk to their young!

AMBROSIA

Tamashii complained about my methods of training her. “I don't like killing creatures if I don't have to,” she said. Honestly, kids today. Why, when I was on my adventure we killed critters and we liked it. The nerve, a nine-year-old not wanting to be horribly traumatized. I understood though, adventuring was a bit of an ugly business, and I wanted to protect her from as much as possible. A person shouldn't have to kill unless others were actually trying to kill them.

So instead, I started some training from my worst imagination. Tamashii was only as strong physically as a child, had no fighting style or technique, and probably would not be able to survive long if she became mentally exhausted from using her powers. We needed to fix some of that. “Okay,” I said, “you won't have to kill any creatures. I'm going to train you hard though.”

Tamashii's abilities didn't use mystic power, they simply required her to concentrate hard. This meant she could slowly use energy, surrounding herself or the areas nearby with energy. While this meant that normally, she was able to reshape what she saw, it also meant she could buff up her own body with psychic energy. Tamashii's grandmother Queen Victoria had some abilities as a Soulfire, and she had been able to do this, according to Nevras. But Tamashii was dependent on what she saw, on her purely psychic abilities, and was unable to do this currently. This would need to change.

I began my blindfolding her, and directing her by hand to Tsukuyomi Mountain. “You are too reliant on your powers being used outside your body. Today, you're going to learn to strengthen yourself and heal yourself.” So saying, I turned my fishing pole into a hammer and brought it down hard on her knee. Sorry, my daughter, but this hurts me more than it does you. Honest. Because immediately, she used her Empathy to transfer the pain over. “Okay, good,” I said, “you can heal even without your vision. Now, we try training your body.” I had her push a boulder roughly as tall as her around. The idea was for her to get the feel of pushing something heavy and to subconsciously use her power to boost her physical strength.

It didn't quite work out the way we'd hoped. A week had passed and her muscles were sore, and she was no closer to figuring it out. “I can't see!” she whined. Nevras, having had to sleep on rocky ground for all this time, finally just said, “Why don’t you do something about that?” Tamashii suddenly had a revelation. Apparently, I was wrong about the whole subconscious use, and we should have just told her. “Oh,” she said, “I could just use my powers on myself.” After that, she walked right up to the boulder like she could see it. She pushed it and pulled it around, then lifted it and threw it in the air to catch it. This didn't go all that well, because we had to get out of the way when she missed. So I told her to clean up her mess. She used her power to make herself faster, so she got in front of the boulder. I was really frightened, until she punched it, and it crumbled apart. I felt like I was watching a *wuxia* show.

Satisfied that she now had developed a second sight, and had a basic grasp of how boost her body strength, I had her hug small forest creatures so she could learn to turn her power boosting on and off consciously, since it probably was not a good idea to have her really strong all the time. Satisfied that her fear of killing them prevented her from doing so, I moved on to martial arts and psychic training. Since we were spending an extended amount of time outside, and Nevras didn't want to use the tent, I typed into my Console. The Console is an MMORPG style drop-down menu, but it primarily operates in Script. So I typed «***Reshape Matter: Earth and Stone, Soften to Foam***.» I saw the rocky ground convert into a sort of foam made of silicon polymers, and had her mold it with her

powers to a mattress at least as good as the one at home. It felt weird openly using my powers, but I had tested this ability before. Nevras never seemed to remember what I had done, his mind constructing false memories to fit the strange events, an townspeople seemed to have a similar problem. Only Tamashii, as a Soulfire with her naturally heightened awareness seemed to notice this, and she seemed to be one for keeping secrets; she only knew that it was a gift from God, not the real reason why I had it. But in fact being unnoticeable was exactly the problem, for each time I used this, I got a little closer to being God, fading from sight for increasingly long periods. Soon, like God, I would be omnipresent. Once that happened, time and space would distort around me. When I was present, they would never remember I left, but since I would have a universe to run, I probably couldn't stay. When I was gone, they would remember me as having died sometime last year.

After she reshaped the foam into a bed, we had her sleep, since it was a major transmutation of matter, and all of us were sore from any nights out in these woods. Next, Nevras and I taught her martial arts, so she had actual skill. She was forbidden to use her boosted strength, instead teaching her to block, sidestep, boost herself up from lying down, and some martial arts moves, mostly ones from *tai chi chuan* that I had learned, but Nevras taught some other forms that he had learned in the Phoenix military.

Satisfied that she was ready in terms of physical fighting, we worked more on her psychic abilities, having her sort out and move grains of sand by color, using her Telekinesis to sculpt solid stone, and finally, I got her to use her powers to do things like stick to surfaces like trees or rocks, and to walk on water. Yup, we were totally training her as a ninja. Tamashii asked, “Could we get back to killing creatures?”

CHAPTER 3

In which Tamashii begins her quest. It's obviously not Ambrosia's quest.

GOD

Hey, it's actually me, Ambrosia. And yet, it's not me. If you somehow missed reading the first part of *Oracle of Tao*, you might not know about my quest to fight the demon Belial, how I collected Crests in the form of tattoos from the Oracles Apollo, Alexander, Chronos, Thanatos, the Four Gods, Lilith, Michael, and the Aiken Master. How I sat atop the Mountain of Fate with my beloved Nevras, as I mastered the power of the Tao. How I kinda sorta got pregnant on that same mountain.

And yet, it's not me. I was conceived by a union with God and my mother, Manna Leaven, who later became Manna Brahman as a result of marrying my dad. I dunno how to explain this, but after I defeated Belial, I was in a white room looking at myself, and everything got weird. This... other me explained that everything that existed was basically a dream, and she had to wake up now. But, well since I had a child and such, and wasn't thrilled at the prospect of sitting alone in the universe and reading books or playing video games, most of which only were there as a result of my imagination sustaining the original authors, I suggested a better idea. And so, before I could become pregnant with Nevras's child (who right now didn't exist), I had to basically make everything real. I wound up becoming pregnant with something entirely different from a baby, the Universe Egg. And I know my explanation sucks, but you've probably already got a headache from that much, so that's about as much recap as I'll give.

So, you know how it's called conception when you start to have someone or something growing inside you? Well, it comes from the idea that we “conceive” or imagine a specific vision of what we want our children to be like. As you probably know if you've raised children, this doesn't really pan out most times, but in this case, I did actually get to see how things would turn out. I began inside the Egg, Naming the things that I wanted to exist. The Earth, the sun, the moon, the stars, and the oceans. Phoenix. Opening. Galaxia. Ghobli. Zuran. Shoten. Aiken Monastery. Goji. Seikai. Gruumi. Yomi. Aquamundo. Atlantis. Kushiyama. Kirin. Heaven. Hell. Qurac. Christmas Village. Futanari. Momiji. Hotaru.

And then I started Naming people. Nevras. Zoe. Yazim Jianne. Azrael. Lilith. Elias. Aqorm. Michael. Selqui. Sera and Phim. Other humans, elves, dwarves, angels, demons, and so on. I didn't Name Jesus, since Jesus didn't seem to need it, and I didn't bother to mention the realm of Void, since I intended to remake it as the First Universe anyway.

But I wasn't done yet. You probably heard of the story of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, and of the man named Adam and woman named Eve. But chances are, you don't fully grasp what this fruit was. It is the ability to imagine things, both good and evil. And when I say that, I generally mean *both*. The problems of the original Earth were because human beings thought this was an *or*. That this person was good or that was a bad sausage so they couldn't really get the concept of what they created being a mixed bag. Well, except for ticks. I can think of nothing good to say about ticks. So if I was to make the world that was real, I would need input. And so, I gathered to me the friends that I had journeyed with inside this Egg, and asked them, "What will you add to this world?" I knew, of course, that later I would have to erase their memories of the event. But still, it was valuable feedback.

Nevras had a simple request, "To make the Egg able to restore this Earth (or itself) if destroyed." This was a good wish. I could see someone like Belial try to ruin the vision of this world, and having a reboot option was really a must. I knew why I liked this guy.

Elias said, "The ability to study forever." I completely understood. Time still passed when someone like Elias read, and before he knew it, his goal to read as much as possible would leave him old and gray. I shrugged, and decided to grant this request as well. Whenever one was reading from now on, no time passed.

Yazim Jianne spoke next, "The knowledge of ley lines to produce persistent magic and alchemy." I wouldn't have understood this wish while I still had been human, but now I did. Normally, sorcerers were the only people who understood how to make decent enchantments, while everyone else drew from their own mystic power. This meant gradually running out of mystic power as each flaming sword or magical lantern trapped portions of their ability, unless they undid some of their enchantments. While a sorcerer like him was able to tap into the renewable power of the land itself, the average wonder-worker did not have this knowledge. It was a risky proposition to have people able to conjure something that would last and last, but I decided it would be okay. Probably. I was a little worried that this might cause some sort of entropy collapse but then I wisely decided to shrug that probability off.

Zoe volunteered, "The Tree of Life." Hmmm, this was a bit problematic. God had originally forbade the Tree of Life once people had begun eating from the other Tree, because the skewed perception of the other one meant potentially a life of eternal suffering. After a great deal of thinking about this one, I finally arrived at the notion that this could be granted, only by placing these in a series of locations that would test if the person involved was ready for immortality. If they weren't, the areas they were in would prove to be impossible to make it through, and they would be forced to turn back or die.

Lilith's request was far more reasonable, "I want demons to have beating hearts and real souls." I could understand her concern. She had lived in a town where the bulk of demons were devoid of kindness and compassion. I wasn't sure how much it would help, because even with a soul, demons had a disturbing fascination with sadism. But I reworked this world so she would at least be able to talk to others of her kind.

Michael asked, "I wish to improve Earth so it is more like Heaven, and Heaven so it is even better." I honestly could see that getting boring, actually, but I decided to grant this request. I did however use my own judgement. I basically wound up merging part of Zoe's wish with Michael's, since raising the vibrations of Earth would create issues with balance, I created a series of very lousy areas for people who needed some challenge or adventure to visit. I likewise decided to make Heaven have a number of really nice beaches and forests and other locales, while also creating places to be where it wasn't all awesome all the time. In days to come, this meant that someone also succeeded in making Hell a tourist destination, since some people now wanted to tour to a place that they could get some real pain and suffering.

Aqorm wished, "Could you also make Eladrin?" I had no idea how she knew about those, but I guess she must have read legends. Eladrin were a tier of elves above even the

high elves, but I wasn't certain the high elves would not resent them. As long as I made them small in population, right now I didn't see why it would hurt. Of course, they were pretty powerful, but I'm sure having a group of elves running around with an insane level of magic would be fine.

Azrael told me, “I want things more like Japanese myth to return, with spirits to govern the forests and rivers.” And so, I made the numerous dragon spirits for the sea, sky, and the land. I made the Sakuya (plant spirits who worked with dryads to help the forests) and the Kochou (butterfly spirits who guarded the forests against destruction).

And Selqui said, “Let there be Sea Kings and Star Lords.” She was referring, of course to gigantic sea creatures and equally frightening creatures of outer space. The good news was that this meant I could create a world where travel outside of Earth was more a real thing. On the other hand, why would you do this?!? Giant terrifying beasts that could crush things whole weren't on the list of things I thought would improve the world. But I shrugged, since I had obliged everyone else. I granted her request.

AMBROSIA

Our group of three obviously had to get bigger, before anything else. And so, the first thing we did was to scout for former members of our group. Shoten turned out to be unsuccessful, as both Elias and Aqorm had long since left the town. On the bright side, while Shoten still had a large drag culture, with the loss of Aqorm, the guards were gone from Delphi's temple. The downside was that aside from a couple of streetwalkers walking the streets, the town seemed a bit hollowed out. There weren't as many people here, and the excitement and energy of the town seemed gone. I guess it's true about not being able to go back to places.

Inside the temple, the windows and decorations were pretty much unchanged, but most of the priestesses had left. What had happened in this town?

I was soon to find out. Delphi explained when I asked, “In the last nine years, new towns have gone up, one after the other. There wasn't enough space for them in some cases, so they were built close to the nearby forests and meadows. That's when the trouble started...” I asked, “What do you mean?” She said, “You remember Zobuu?”

Ah yes. When the Council reformed, some of the rules got changed. One of them was a relaxing of the rules about building towns and such, which was now fine so long as they didn't all incorporate. So some of the other critters just started building houses in certain areas, and those houses kinda gathered together in something shaped like a town. Although, in some cases it wasn't like a town, such as when Nezumi or various types of fey tried to build. Nezumi “towns” were often a gathering of junk piles, and the grungier and more bug-infested the better. Those pack rats. Zobuu, on the other hand, was a planned community to try to kind of force several different races together in one town. Unfortunately, as any sane person could tell you, that wouldn't work. The elves hated the dwarves, the humans tended to step on or trip over species of halflings or gnomes, and so on. I nodded, “Too many people forced to live together...” Delphi shook her head, “Do you remember *where* it was built?”

I remembered, “They kind of had to build it right next to the Great Tree, didn't they?” She nodded, “Yes, that was what started the trouble. You see, it, and towns like it that were built too close to the forests enraged the Kochou.”

I cringed. The Kochou were fierce bug warriors. I didn't know too much about them, except what I knew from being God (and I tried to forget some of that stuff anyway), but the males I guess they were had thick skin almost like armor, and the other ones were extremely beautiful with powerful magic and the ability to fly. The females specialized in the Wind spell, but their level of power was so insane that one flapping their wings in one area could cause a disaster across the world. Delphi explained that the Kochou had basically burned the town and some areas were now in a state of sectioned anarchy. She told us that many people were afraid they would come to Shoten next, so they left for parts unknown. At least Opening didn't have to worry about that. When armies marched on many countries during the last major war, they quickly figured out that Opening had a natural barrier (by that I mean not rocks or streams, but like vines springing up from the ground and tossing them around). Azrael researched this shortly after we defeated Belial,

and we discovered that the spirit of a soldier was actually guarding this area against harm. The Kochou didn't even bother.

"Anyway," she said, "The problems of our little town don't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world. Go to Tsukuyomi Mountain and talk to Lao Tzu." A woman nearby said, "That's what Delphi said to me, too! I asked her what gender my child would be, and she said, 'Go to Tsukuyomi Mountain and talk to Lao Tzu.' What a worthless fortune teller!" Come to think of it, we kinda already knew where to go. But, well, we were only following orders. That never turned out badly.

Once out of town, Tamashii dragged my arm, "We're not going to the Mountain! Not now, anyway. We're going to stop those Kochou right now, and that's that!" It suddenly dawned on me that Tamashii was a much different hero than I was. While I preferred to just obey instructions and do the bare minimum, Tamashii was one of those types that wanted to raid a dungeon because of adventure, and believed in all of those stories about heroism and virtue. She wasn't old enough yet to understand that many problems had multiple perspectives, and what seemed right on the outset rarely ever was. She just didn't understand moral relativism like I did.

I tried to struggle, but her telekinetic powers were pretty strong. When I ran, the force of her pressing downward was like a powerful downward pressure. And then she pulled the two of us until finally we surrendered. "Alright, alright!" I said, "But first, let's go and pick up some allies! They're too strong for just the three of us!"

TAMASHII

Before anything else, we needed a good healer. I mean, I had almost died because Mom was reckless and feckless and ruthless, and probably another few -less adjectives, allowing me to train without a proper medic handy. I mean, she did try her best to protect me, since she did have a large tent handy for procuring all manner or potions and elixirs from. And yet, if I were really struggling, by the time she got back from the store I would be dead! And it was a pain to revive me, after all.

We also needed a source of exposition. Since someone in this story needed to tell us the historical background of every ruin we visited, we couldn't get too far without him. Since he wasn't in Shoten, I assumed some other library would be a fair guess, based on what Mom told me about him. I'd only met the guy a few times, since Aqorm tended to hang out with her "husband" more often. As godfather, Elias basically only showed up when all of us got together. He was working on some project.

After trying first in the library of Kushiyama, and second in Futanari, we located him in the depths of the Great Library. When the Realm of Void collapsed, any matter than wasn't First Material (including people) got shunted into this newer Earth, so Futanari and its interesting people were here to stay. Regardless, Elias was greatly absorbed in trying to apply something he just read, so matters of new towns was not his concern.

"I'm studying Inner Alchemy," he mumbled, with one hand on the book, and the other moving his arms and legs like the diagram explained. He apparently was trying to repair his meridian and reconfigure his circulation of *dantian*, in hopes of being able to use magic other than various clerical prayers and variations of Light or Dark. Before he could figure it out though, our presence distracted him and he had to quit for the day. One day, he could possibly manage it. But today, Mom's persistent questions caused him to lose focus, as surely as a cat constantly crying to go out while someone is writing will totally break one's focus. Poor Miss Kitty. I got to meet her later, thanks to time travel.

He eventually looked up at us, "What are you two doing here? Could it be that you're on another quest?" I said, "Got it in one try." He had only noticed those two, because they were at eye level from where he stood, but now he looked down to notice a little pipsqueak like me. He nodded, "I see the resemblance to Ambrosia. And Nevras too. You must be their daughter." I explained, "I'm Tamashii. I'm a Soulfire. Mom said you'd know what that is." He looked at me with surprise now, "A Soulfire? You're an *empath*? Ambrosia, how did she get like this?" I knew the reason for his surprise, people like me were rare enough that people thought we were possessed or something, seeing our incredible powers. I explained, "Mom always says it's a side-effect of the Oracle powers she got." Nevras added, "She was always a sweet and sensitive child, but one day, I got

cut when I was chopping wood. She kissed the wound, and it healed right away. We kinda suspected it before that, as from birth she seemed to have some weird power. It took a few tests to confirm it though."

Elias went to another section, and began pulling out research books on the causes and side-effects of being a Soulfire. "I've read all about these people, but it's more impressive seeing her!" he said. I was beginning to get annoyed at his attention, " I'm not a... what was the word, Mom?" She reminded me, "Specimen." "Yeah that!" I said, "You gotta treat me more like a person." Elias apologized, but I eventually did decide that if he would go with us, he could occasionally study my abilities. He jumped at the chance.

After picking up Elias, we returned to Mom's old home. Opening had not changed much except for the addition of more streetlights, and something called a drone. They were metal bees animated by runes with a single large eye able to relay back images to elsewhere, and stingers capable of delivering a deadly poison. Opening was still the insane despotism it had always been, but now they could watch everyone's every move. And any other town, this would be terrible. But Opening only seemed to care about people who broke the laws. What with some systems blackmailing people for their secrets or hunting down people who were different from a norm, to have surveillance only involved in police work was a relief, given how easily such things could be abused. Still, getting harpooned by a deadly stinger, and all.

We did our best to keep a low profile, as we didn't want to be written into the books as criminals and hunted down by the drones, so we made our way through town without talking to anyone or doing anything that might loosely be construed as suspicious. Mom had told me how the town used to have more guards proper, and charged a fare to leave, cutting people apart who tried to leave without paying. That's right, leaving was almost a capital crime. They didn't do that anymore, thankfully. Now the guard, at Mom's advice, earned their money some other way. But she would never tell me what that way was...

Mom suggested first to check the graveyard, but after finding it had been abandoned, we tried other things. The flower in Sarai Jianne's grave had not been replaced recently, but then I couldn't find her grave anymore. Her former husband had finally moved on since her death, I guess. Next, we went to Yazim Jianne's mansion.

The last time the group had visited, it had been a death trap from start to finish, despite Mom coming to forgive him and ask him to join the group. But surely now that he knew us, his mansion would be relatively safe.

No such luck. Now there were a whole *new* set of challenges that awaited us. After suffering the slings and arrows of... well, a well-timed trap, we headed back outside rather than continue to stay in there and look like pincushions. It was time to go shopping. Mom provided me an allowance, and I quickly bought a fine vest of mithril. If it was good enough for hobbitses in that book to stop arrows, it was certainly good enough for me. With the remaining money, we bought pots and pans, and a spring-loaded grappling hook gun thingy. It was jet black and had a curious-looking bat design on the side. The shopkeeper asked us, "So where are you going, that you need all of this stuff?" We told her, and after a minute or so, she came back with a bunch of other tools, including sticks of dynamite and wire cutters. Just who was this old friend of Mom's, that villagers suddenly panicked at the thought of entering his house?

YAZIM JIANNE

After about nine years, I had begun to realize the foolishness of evil. When I was a mad scientist helping people, I had no major problems with other people, and few in general. And yet, scheming with the demon Belial brought me hardship, all because I failed to realize the simple elegance of doing things the honest way. I could have simply taken Sarai's body to a priest and brought her back, or simply rewound time slightly to make sure that she didn't repeat this tragedy. Instead, I had decided to help a demon when there was in fact no proper need to do so. His promises, sweet words at the time, proved foolish now.

But I wasn't the only fool here. Belial had thought to strike back at all that lived by forcibly colliding both worlds instead of letting them naturally become one again as God had done. He had almost ruined not only my plans, but destroyed himself and everything

around him. And for what? Because a few people teased or rejected him? At least, that was the official story from reading *The Demonic Histories: Volume XIII*. From life with Selqui, I had begun to realize that evil was a sure way to hurt oneself far more than it was to gain anything of value. I had noticed that everything from sex (Sarai and Surrogate Lover # 2 had both preferred extremely rough sex), to the way my home was set up (the more "secure" I kept my house, the more dangerous it was to me), to the way I ate (I ate quite a bit of unhealthy sludge while plotting with Belial) was naturally causing me pain. So foolish, so destructive was evil, that it took a good woman (and by that I mean she was decent to me, not that she was good) to help me break some of these habits.

Selqui was as messed up as I was, but she was a pragmatist. She would do anything no matter how depraved, as was the case for myself; however, her desires were tempered by the act of thinking things through. And so, one night she asked me, "...Why couldn't you have just gone back in time to save Sarai?" I realized I couldn't answer. That night, we set about to make things right. Selqui and I didn't want to screw up our timeline, since my goal was a large portion of why I joined Ambrosia, so we went to a parallel dimension. However, while I was gone another dimension's Yazim Jianne stole Sarai away from me. Roughly 50% of all parallel dimensions had unscrupulous Yazim Jiannes that went alone and married Sarai, taking her far away from this dimension. The other half were like mine, where she saw me and left in a huff before completing the experiment that would kill her. Time travel was safe because I entered at a moment where the native Yazim Jianne had taken a bathroom break.

While Selqui did indeed break me of some of my more destructive impulses, the need to feel secure at all costs was a tougher habit than most to break. After the hospitality disaster of Ambrosia's last visit, I made certain to have an easy way to enter my home. I installed a metallic knocker, that when knocked three times, would open the house without incident. Of course, anyone rude enough to just turn the doorknob would draw the attention of myself (through my viewing globe) and the house's security system. Of course, there was still a chance that a thief or killer would knock before entering, so I made two other security systems. First, by the stairs an Eye of Truth was carved into the wood, determining the true goals of the person entering. Should it determine that they were a thief or scoundrel, they would be hit by a powerful illusion that would render them unable to notice anyone of value (by the way, there is no objective measure for morally determining whether someone is a scoundrel with magic, so not only did this not work, but I usually qualified under this standard, meaning that I usually stumbled around blind in my own house; I was planning on getting that removed). The illusion was so subtle that most people would be unable to notice it, because unlike most, it added nothing unreal but rather erased from view what was real. I also had a *kamaitachi*, a sort of critter made of wind with a dog-like howl. Like dogs everywhere, they were loyal and protective of their household against any who would enter with malicious intent, but this guy had dog DNA mixed with the cells of an air elemental. I figured I needed something which could ignore my many traps, since my chimeras from before tended to end up as meaty chunks as the traps periodically finished off months of work. Air was the best element, as neither the physical world, nor fire, nor ice could really put a dent in it, yet it was able to cut through trees and shrubs with its powerful strikes; also, its body was incredibly soft and fluffy to pet. But usually, someone who knocked were a pleasant characters who didn't run afoul of these guys, so I trained it to respond well to that.

Of course, Ambrosia had been raised in a barn and didn't bother to knock. She entered once with her family and almost got impaled by my arrows, then came back with more supplies. They rushed in, this time with pots and pans to block my arrows as they came from all directions. My *kamaitachi* sniffed at them from all directions, then whined. It knew these people were no threat to me. Someone should tell my security system that. I had no way of shutting it off, and couldn't go up to the lobby area once it activated, so I was with Selqui in the laboratory, working out how to automatically make cheese. I had a device which used dominoes, marbles, and all sorts of pulleys and ramps to mix the milk solids into curd. This was going to be the wave of the future, if I could keep the marbles from falling into the vat. "Hey Selqui," I paused my experiment, "could you maybe go out there and tell the others where we are?" She edged across the room

filled with piles of notes, beakers, and other obstacles. It would take her awhile, but she, much like the Wind Dogs, had an ability to stand up to those traps.

In the mean time, the rest of them were having trouble. The layout of my house was similar to before, but with the addition of traps, some of these sections were like completely different rooms. The last time, someone had stolen food from the kitchen, so now it was trapped for the wall to close up and fill with acid. Of course, this made it tricky in the event that I sleepwalked to that kitchen to grab a midnight snack. To say nothing of the fact that the upstairs bedroom itself had traps of its own. Every night, in order to go to bed, I had to carefully move around the edges of my room, as I had set a series of pressure plates. One wrong step would cause the ceiling and the floor to meet unexpectedly. I loved how cozy and secure my bedroom was.

Some of these traps could have been planned better, too. I had a swinging axe trap in the bathroom that got triggered if you sat on the toilet. I had to use a bucket and then toss it in, or risk losing my manhood. Another trap dropped a giant rolling boulder, but was in the dining room with the dining table, routinely running over porcelain, silver, and crystal with a huge rock. If not for my temporal magic, I would lose a small fortune every time someone sat down in the wrong chair. It was worth it to watch this happen though.

In any case, it seemed like in the course of exploring, they triggered nearly every trap. Lilith even managed to trigger the kitchen one, as once again she helped herself to my food. What? I keep a nicely-stocked fridge. In any case, it didn't do much good. Sure, the room closed off, and filled with acid, but this was sulfuric acid. It turns it from being around fire and brimstone all the time, demons had a biological resistance to sulfur. Not being able to breathe in a closed room might have been an issue, but it was actually fairly easy to bring down the wall, for the outside of the wall had a lever which read, «In case of accidental imprisonment inside this wall, pull lever.» She made it out okay. But by the time that Selqui showed them to my laboratory, they were pretty bruised up.

AMBROSIA

A regular house has a number of spirits tied to it. Well, there are spirits in all things like rocks, trees, bodies of water, and so on. God ordained that this world be sustained by a complex system, and so everything became supervised by most invisible beings. I didn't even know of it until I got a house of my own.

I remember when we first got it. I had inherited it from King Charis as a bounty prize, but I didn't actually claim it until after Tamashii began to get grief in Opening. I spent the whole day clearing land by turning my Conception fishing rod into various farming and mining tools. Then I spent most of the next few days making rows for the garden, organizing the house, and setting up our scarecrow, Mister Zuran, along with our beds and our stove, and our toilet. By the end of the week, as things started to settle, they moved in. Akaname and Kawaya were first, as my bathroom apparently needed help. Kawayaname was a blind man clutching a spear, and his role was to protect the toilet from things like frogs and snakes, but in return he demanded that I build a shrine nearby and cough whenever I was about to use it (he was blind after all). Akaname was a water elemental, but hideous to look at, and she was apparently attracted to untidiness. I tried to see as little of her as possible, but it didn't really turn out that way. By contrast, Undine, our main water elemental who helped with all of our irrigation and our sink and stuff, was a downright attractive woman carrying a jar of water, but it took her the longest time to get here, second only to our nymph who only showed up after crops got planted. Somewhere in the middle, we learned of the *domovoi* after trying and failing several times to start a fire. This fire elemental declared himself master of the house, and even if it weren't true we weren't going to correct him since he could burn down the place. Nevras told me that houses typically had at least some of these, with more entering the more different facets there were in the house. People with big closets or a lot of them, for instance, tended to have something called *zashiki-warashi*. We don't have any closets though, so that's not an issue.

But of course, Yazim Jianne's “house” is not a regular house. He is rather insane, and has set up his house to such an extent of security that it can no longer be lived in. He was so paranoid that he couldn't sleep in his own bed, enter the kitchen, or go to the bathroom

without risking being maimed. Things kinda do have to be in balance, you know. In effect, he failed miserably at actually living in his place, so he had to hire or make creatures or set up traps. I felt like these things were mutually exclusive. There was no way he could have any such thing... or so I thought. He'd apparently enlisted the help of some sort of dog made from wind (Elias says it's a *kamaitachi*), and his laboratory featured an actual Muse. Elias mentioned mostly patrons of the arts, with names like Calliope, Clio, Erato, Euterpe, Melpomene, Polyhymnia, Terpsichore, Thalia, and Urania. This one insisted she was a Muse of Mad Science, and called herself Enraptea or Entropia. Not that either of them noticed her as she supported her entire body with her hair. People unaccustomed to real house spirits tended not to notice them. Somehow or other, I got them distracted from their project just long enough to say hello to us.

YAZIM JIANNE

I exited the laboratory just in time to notice the usual entourage. There was Nevras, there was Ambrosia, and it looked they had kidnapped some purple-haired brat to show to me. I wagered after seeing her face that she was likely direct kin to them, but I honestly didn't feel like asking. These people were a nuisance to my science! However, I knew if I told them to leave me alone, they'd likely come back much later with even more people.

And so, begrudgingly, I talked to them. I noticed Ambrosia's new kid first, so I addressed her, “Well, hello there little child, will you come play with me?” The little girl known as Tamashii raised an eyebrow. “Look Mommy,” said she, “this man is a pedophile.” She said this in such a strange combination of worry and snark, that it was difficult to tell if she meant it. My, what a precocious child. I certainly didn't know such words until I was at least 11. Ambrosia glowered at me, then shook her head, “No he's not, but he **is** gonna be beaten up for scaring any child of mine.” She rushed forward, and knocked me around a bit, hamstringing me, before punching my shoulder, stomach, arm, and eye. I didn't mind so much. They were light punches, after all. I could tell she wasn't really trying to hurt me, just giving me a warning to never actually be a pedophile around her kid. “Mercy! Mercy,” I said, “You spared me before!”

All the same though, my current love interest was also fiercely protective of me, so this started a fight, and I finally had to touch Selqui and tell her, “Relax! Relax, I'm all right. She was just roughing me up a little bit because she was worried about her child. See? I mostly just have a black eye.” Looking at Ambrosia's eye, it wasn't much better.

TAMASHII

The adults caught reminisced about their previous quests, and filled each other in on the latest events in their lives. My parents gushed about me and their family friends. They talked about Aqorm, Lilith, and Michael, and how their children had grown up alongside me. Mom asked him about himself, and whether he was still mourning someone named Sarai. He explained the accident to me, and I was about to offer my condolences before he told me that had been “taken care of.” Mom asked him to join the old gang again, he also told about what he'd been up to with Selqui. How they'd tried to have children themselves, but there were issues with fertility. Something about them being different species. He talked about he attempts to experiment with other forms of reproduction being in the works, and several other inventions they had made in the last few years, including a key part of the cellphone I bought from Mom and Dad's allowance.

As they talked on and on about the last few years, I gradually longed for my own friends, and picked up this cellphone and called them. I may have talked for a few hours, but it was cool. Cell phones were a bit different than either my parents or previous generations knew. Unlike Mom's phones they weren't enchanted, so no magic users had their mystic power locked up. But neither were they electronic devices with hourly, monthly, or per minute charges. It was a high upfront cost though for a SIM card.

My parents paid me 10 Gold a week in exchange for chores, and 30 Gold if I actually helped them save money on food for the week. The way phones normally were priced was that the phone itself was very cheap, only about 10 Gold. Unlike the older models, these phones worked without any sort of enchantment, but they did use alchemy to convert nearby runes into electrical energy. Without a SIM card, the cellphone could still use its basic functions and transmit sound but it was kind of like watching television with

just a bunny ears. The signal was terrible, and the range was on par with a walkie-talkie. The SIM (Seismic Interconnection Material) basically aligned with nearby ley lines, allowing one to speak across incredible distances, provided you were on the same planet and in the same dimension. They had to be connected to a ley line by an expert though.

As for the conversation, Portia told me all about the latest things going on in Heaven and asked after me for awhile. I assured her that I was fine, that I was just in a monotonous meeting with my mother and her mad scientist friend. After I hung up, I called Sastra, and explained where I was, but I didn't get very far before Aqorm asked in the background who it was. "You spend too much time on that damned phone, Sastraneth!" she shouted. I heard Lilith call out, "Awww c'mon, dear, leave her be, she's not hurting anything!" I heard heated shouting about how today's youth ignored their parents and spent too much time on machines, and how someday people would probably have machines inside them or something. Sastraneth said she had to hang up early, but it was okay. Aqorm was probably right. I turned my attention back to my parents. It sounded like they were about ready to go anyway.

Anyway, now about half of our group was found. The others might be tricky though, since Azrael and Zoe were wandering somewhere around the world last I heard, and the others had family to care for. I suppose getting to them might be a bit more difficult. Now that we had more of a group, we could peacefully visit the Kochou, and ask them nicely to stop bothering the poor humans.

ZOE

Each day during the last nine years, we explored the world. Each night, Azrael and I cuddled close to each other. We couldn't do much about the fact that neither of us could become pregnant with each other's child, but each night Azrael prayed to God. All of our friends were happily married, but we had nothing to show for our time together. I suppose it didn't matter, but still it hurt feeling left out.

MARIPOSA

As it happens, that was the day our precious forest got ruined by that weird looking group of people. First came a girl with blue hair, who I'm convinced said something about squashing those bugs. Then there was a purple-haired girl who laughed maniacally as she proceeded to burn down our forest. And there was a blond who chopped down some bushes to make a path. Of course, I could have been imagining all of this. I'm told sometimes my fantasies take over. But I'm sure that's what I saw!

Uhhhh, well maybe not. The others tell me that I have a vivid imagination, and tend to see and hear what I want to be the case. In any case, because of what I imagined or was real, I attacked these humans. So it was totally in self-defense!

I didn't always used to be like this, after all. I started out as an egg, like all others of my kind. I was immediately enlisted into the army of caterpillars. I quickly rose through the ranks since I was brave and a good strategist. Yet deep inside, I felt something wasn't right. I felt like there was a beautiful woman inside waiting to come out. Like most caterpillars, I knew that one day I would be a fabulous beautiful butterfly, and all eyes would look at me with envy. And here I am! With my long brown hair curled into neat ringlets, wide hips, narrow waist, perky breasts, a short green dress, and the blue-black wings of an Eastern Tiger Swallowtail, you can hardly believe that a pretty butterfly like me used to be one of those ugly caterpillars. As I marched about in my green robe, carrying a spear and commanding others, I commanded fear. But now, my subordinates lust after me, knowing that I bestow favor to those who please me.

"Oh my God!" said the blue-haired one, "What are you attacking us for? We just came to talk!" I answered, "That's 'Oh my empress.' Or 'Oh my beauty.' But God? Nahh, don't give me so much credit." They looked at me like I was a narcissist or something. But that was ridiculous! In any case, I calmly explained that I couldn't make any deals with the likes of them, since they destroyed my forest.

"What are you talking about? We just entered to speak with you," the human larva explained, "but then you went crazy and used psychic powers to burn down your own forest!" I would hear none of this madness! "Troops, begin your attack!" They raised their spears, preparing to charge this threat. Their group defeated some of my soldiers,

but they did manage to give these interlopers some decent pokes and scratches. I decided to fight with the young one, as it seemed like she had some sort of dangerous power. Her blue-haired relative appeared angry at me for some reason, following this decision.

Kochou are guardians of the forest with strong powers over nature. But of course this is only true after they emerge from their chrysalis. Before that, these lowly soldiers can only fight. But since I was a powerful and sexy butterfly, I could do all sorts of things like create wind storms, spread a paralyzing dust, or attack with powerful telekinesis. I could even help plants grow and bloom. And of course, I could make fire of my own.

In fact, I tried to flap my wings and blow some toxic dust at her right at that moment, but instead it felt like there was a gap in the air. The venom got a certain distance from her, and then just dissipated. I decided if I couldn't paralyze her, I might as well burn her. And yet, this too proved to be ineffective.

The youngling extended her arms, and a bright flame appeared near me. This wasn't how wizards or sorcerers typically used magic. There was nothing coming from her hands, there were no runes, and it appeared to have spontaneously ignited. She must be a psychic! Well, no matter. In addition to my powerful wings which made short work of that flame, I did have some psychic ability of my own. I sent an iridescent bubble towards her, bursting on contact. She stared at it with the typical curiosity of a child, until it touched her of course. I could use a few beams and bursts of psychic energy, some of which pushed things back, some which dealt psychic damage to one's body or mind, and some which warped or destroyed objects. This one caused psychosomatic pain. I didn't really wanna hurt her, I just wanted to make her feel my pain for destroying the forest, which my minions kept glaring at me like I caused.

I was about to turn my attention to the rest of this group, when I saw her forcefully push herself up, saying, “I... will... not let... this... stop me!” She spread her hands apart and suddenly I felt my psychic effect shatter. We shot balls of energy at each other, flying about almost like some martial arts fantasy show and blasting, parrying and punching each other. “My name is Tamashii. Why are you attacking us?” the youngling asked while fighting. “You destroyed my forest,” I accused. “**Me?!?**” she countered, shocked at my words, “I saw you burn your own forest. What are you talking about?” Looking at the faces of my troops, I suddenly realized Tamashii was telling the truth, but I couldn't deal with that now. I pushed her back with a wave of force, knocking her into a stone building so hard that a good chunk of rubble knocked loose. If she hadn't managed a shield at the last second, she would be mush. As it was, she looked extremely bruised. Using nothing more than the power of her mind, she grasped the rock and slammed it into me. I went unconscious for a few minutes, and my troops spent their time trying to make sure I was in good condition. By the time I awoke, they were gone. But worse, she had made a paper-thin cut on my face, that would probably heal in a day or two. I will have my revenge! Nobody makes me temporarily look ugly and gets away with it!

Time passed, as my army marched toward the town. They sang about a girl worth fighting for, and about what it meant to be a man. Memories flooded back to when I had been a man, and longed the attentions of a pretty woman. But now, of course, I was a pretty woman and I was cursed to only interested in one beautiful woman. Me, of course! What, you thought I had a lover?

I caught sight of them rather quickly, seeing as how many of the people in town had either moved away or were in hiding after our last attack on their villages. As they saw us, they fled down the narrowest street that they could find. My troops were too numerous, so they quickly bottle-necked in the slim alley, cutting the amount of troops that could still move down to five besides myself. “Onward, my troops! We will rejoin the others later!” I commanded. Those remaining said, “Yes, sir!” I glared at them. “Yes... General Mariposa!” one of them corrected. That's better. Seriously, did they just assume my gender? Another squad member, this one still in the early larval stages, asked of me, “What are our orders, miss? Are we to continue as before?” I shook my head, “Pursue the little girl, but leave the others alone. The others did not burn my home. But we need her captured. How dare she cut my face!”

Our quarry knew tactics though. They headed straight for a pair of hanging clothes, and slipped under those to make a sharp turn, losing us for a second. Then one of the

better looking men seemed to slow down, and one of my troops pursued him closely. It was all a ruse though, as he quickly got out of the way while one of his friends pushed some crates on my soldier. They couldn't take even the five of my troops in single combat, armored with their tough green-black-white exoskeletons, so they pretty much needed to run. They moved to the right, swerving suddenly as a traveling merchant passed through. Our troops slowed down just enough for them to gain more of a lead, and they darted straight for a small shed near the temple. Our remaining troops followed, and it seemed the others finally made it out of that alley. I ordered them to split and surround that house. They climbed a ladder near the house. A sign on the house mentioned that it would be repaired soon, but this sign had been there the last visit. Knowing that my platoon of caterpillars were entirely too bulky to be on the roof, I ordered them not to follow, so they waited at the bottom. I followed the group up, yet light as my body was, there were too many on the roof. I heard something creak, just as the last of them made a desperate leap to the next rooftop. I was about to follow, when this roof gave out. I used my wings to slow my fall to a graceful landing, and surveyed the inside of the building.

The room was a treasure room! It was filled with wigs, clothing, and cosmetics. I locked the door. My subordinates mustn't see me like this! I stuffed my curly brown hair under a long blond wig, added some rouge and eyeshadow, and then slipped of my green dress to put on a red taffeta gown that extended to my knees. I wanted to try the dark brown wig with the pleated school uniform next, or maybe the short wig with the blouse and leather pants... Or perhaps...

The troops knocked, “Is the situation okay within? You seem to be locked in. Should we knock down the doors?” I panicked, and collected my wits before I told them, “**Negative**! Be at ease. Return to base. I will rejoin you in 0700 hours.” I would let them go for today. I had more important things to take care of.

SELQUI

Leaping from building to building was hard. I'm a bit of a fish out of water. The group had trained me years ago on how to move like a normal human being, but I hadn't moved around much when we were at home running all sorts of tests for my darling. I blushed, realizing my feelings. In any case, after years of only marginal activity, I just kinda felt like I had a ton of blubber. That wasn’t true though.

The roofing held since our heaviest was probably Ambrosia at 5'8” and like 150 lb. Nevras, on account of his dieting to maintain his figure was rather lean in comparison, Yazim Jianne forgot to eat, Tamashii was just a kid, Elias figured out where we were heading in advance and split from the group, and I... well, I felt like a total fatty but I was probably 25 lb less that her. But I definitely was more clumsy than her. While she rolled gracefully after her jump to a standing position, I fell prone and had trouble jumping to the next roof. I never felt more like a half-seal than trying to leap from buildings.

For some reason, Elias didn't seem to have caught their interest anyway, and I suspected only Tamashii might be their target right now. And so, we made it to the end of town without getting caught by those spear-wielding bugs. But since our group was still incomplete, and we were unclear as to what to do, Ambrosia proposed we head to see Lao Tzu. I think she just got off on climbing mountains. There was a sense of adrenaline rush, I guess.

The mountain had thawed for a change, so the climbing was fairly easy. The mountain was covered with vibrant grass, with flowers of purple or yellow flooding the cliff faces. That wasn't the only thing “flooding” them though, part of the mountain covered with a waterfall. We sought shelter inside a cave, stopping to dry our clothes, then rest and eat before continuing with our climb.

We made it to the top, but this time we didn't even have to bother crossing over to that island (which was good, because it creeped me out) because Lao Tzu was sitting on our side. The cat, seeing us, decided to run away. But it was no good. Ambrosia broke into a run and tackled the poor kitty. She began to pet his ears, “Who's a good kitty? Who's a good kitty??? Who's going to tell me exactly the best way of renewing my Oracle powers? Yes you are~! Yes you are~~~!” Lao Tzu purred loudly, before agreeing to

help, “Your means of acquiring the Crest of the Oracle... is exactly the same as last time! There, now you know. So I'm going to sleep.” Frustrated at not having some kind of shortcut to quickly recoup her powers, she began to walk down, when Lao Tzu stopped her, “Just a minute! Even if I'm about to sleep, I don't recall telling you to stop petting!” And so, three hours later, we finally headed back to Shoten, towards the port.

Since our ship was elsewhere, we paid the fee to sail to Zuran and went below deck. Unlike most of the others, I'm not sure I'd actually been on a charter ship, since my first experience with riding on a boat began after they had already bought theirs. I know, it seems like all boats are the same, but this one I was pleased to see got us to our destination swiftly rather than being lost at sea. We made it. Today was the first day of the rest of our journey, and the next day of the first day of the rest of our life.

CHAPTER 4

In which the group joins together again. Somewhat.

AMBROSIA

From Zuran, we'd normally head to Ghobli to take in some shopping, or head to the Hidden Forest to see some natural beauty. But I had a kid with me, and we'd already climbed a mountain together and taken a long boat ride. I was concerned that she'd quickly become bored and start whining about having come on this trip. Tamashii was always looking for adventure, but it was a shame that she didn't understand that while adventure was an end to boredom, it also meant troubled times. As soon as we docked, we marched directly over to the Aiken Monastery, which was always entertaining.

Maybe it was because unlike many nations that welcomed all visitors, the Aiken Monastery had this seemingly backwards notion of complete sovereignty from all unwanted influence (that somehow worked, because the place had apparently never had any spies or invasions). Maybe it was the fact that in order to be let in, we literally got put through a fortuneteller predicting what we might do, and the last time she basically trolled us. Or maybe it was the whole matter of having an army of the dead located directly underground from their main tower, and everyone was somehow cool with this.

In any case, I came there fully expecting to have an interesting experience. I was unfortunately let down. Gwen, the resident fortuneteller/lie-detector was sick in bed with the cold. The guards simply stamped our fingerprints, checked our passports, and harvested stem cells from our bone marrow before letting us through. I swear, without her running things, the whole system was pretty lax!

Aiken Monastery had changed quite a bit from the time I had last seen it, roughly nine years ago. For a place that only allowed a select number of people in, it had become a boom town. I had heard that Lilith had originally bought the upper part of the Aiken Monastery tower, but it looked like she had built a tavern at ground level since then.

Lilith was working full-time as a chef, and making good money. It seemed like she was the breadwinner, and Aqorm just worked part time as a musician for the restaurant while helping raise Sastra. It was Friday night, the one day of the week when she took a break from being a mother, and worked on her art. Her act consisted of stripping down to nothing (as an elf, lack of modesty was part of her culture) and playing her heart out for roughly three hours. Initially, she had gotten some public morals types saying that she was playing evil music or corrupting the youth, but since she wasn't doing anything sexual, eventually people just called it art. Like Andy Kaufman, it was weird, but it was her thing. People typically cut her some slack because she was a mother.

With the money that Aqorm got from performing, Aqorm was able to buy an omnimusica, something that looked like a mix between a pipe organ and keyboard, which allowed someone to solo an entire band's performance, since it had five levels of keyboards stacked atop each other, plus some foot pedals for organ pipes. It really required someone super-fast or to be six-handed to be able to play though. Yet she utterly rocked it. Then she noticed us, and suddenly felt modest playing in the nude.

“Hey there!” said Aqorm, fastening a tight black dress (that was obviously a loan from Lilith) to her body. Lilith finished cooked a *coq au vin*, and called Aqorm to deliver it to

table six. After this, Lilith promptly closed the restaurant and told everyone they could finish their meals but after that everyone had to go. The restaurants doors were designed to swing open from the inside even if locked, so the clients gradually left the building, allowing us to talk in earnest. The doors locked, and we talked with the two of them.

LILITH

I teased her a bit, “You're kinda looking chubby, Ambrosia!” Ambrosia had gained maybe 10 or 11 lb since she had become a mother, mostly because she ate real meals and stopped living on scraps. For her height, her weight was actually healthy, but years ago she was actually almost underweight as a result of being a beggar. At least, I hoped she knew I was teasing. Sometimes Ambrosia could get oversensitive.

After a tense silence, she smiled and said, “Well, what about you?” She pinched my cheeks as though I was overweight and there was something there to pinch. To be honest, as a demon I did have a lot of weight, but this was mostly due to muscle mass and bone density. I looked 130 lb or so, but my bones weighed closer to 450 or 500 lb.

Aqorm spoke next, trying to keep everyone from possibly getting self-conscious. “Hey now, cut that out you two! Both of you can probably fit into a size 8 at most. Anyway, what are you guys doing here? Last I knew you were shacked up together in, well...” A shack. Yes, this is what I heard too, that they were living in some run-down place out in the middle of nowhere. Were they really happy being away from any major town? “So what you been doing here lately, you two?” Ambrosia asked.

Aqorm and I explained our buying the tavern. I originally had been a butcher as I liked chopping meat, and my specialty dishes tended to involve copious amounts of blood and guts. A demon chef was a popular selling point, it turned out, and I kinda made a foodie tourism movement, gradually expanding my repertoire to include many classical dishes like escargot or baked Alaska. More interestingly, well... you know how there was a movement awhile back to make tofu and other vegetable products look like meat? Well, I believed in the importance of meat and more meat in the diet, so I began molding and shaping meat to look convincingly like veggies. It was a hit, and just one more reason I had a cult-like following. Besides how creepy my eyes got while cutting.

As for Aqorm, she played everything from hits from the 20th century, to the mid-30th century, to modern music. As you know, after 2030 or so, big business record labels no longer had a hand in music production for nearly 1000 years, since all evil was banished from the Earth (and let's face it, some of those deals are pretty unscrupulous), so all music was experimental. Then Ungorr destroyed all the new music he could get his hands on, because it hurt his ears. And for awhile, music had to find its place again, especially since the New Earth had no technology until alchemy was invented. Now we have all these cool new instruments. And we have genres like Goblin Metal, Elysium, and Dragoncore. I’m also told that Vaporwave is making a comeback. Aqorm had also made great stride in the last nine years toward developing new Protection power as an elf, and learning how to use geomancy more frequently than once daily.

Then I noticed Tamashii, “What a cute kid she is! I just wanna eat her up.” Ambrosia glared at me, so I added, “Not literally.” I'm not a monster or anything. I'd met Tamashii before when she was young, but she'd seen Aqorm a lot more than me because I was always working. Tamashii spoke, “Hi there! Mommy tells you that you're a lesbian.” Not that there's anything wrong with that. I shook my head, “Well, you see, that's not true at all! I happen to be a bisexual. As long as my men are pretty and my women are strong, that is. It wouldn't matter if you were a boy or a girl, I'd still think you're cute. Too bad you're young.” Ambrosia loudly cleared her throat, “***Ahem*** Anyway, you two, I was wondering about...” I was way ahead of her, “You were wanting my help, right? I already know. I've been out of the house lately. The underworld keeps me informed about all kinds of events, so I know that you probably are likely to have another of your missions.” She told me how her sources knew of an angel making trouble.

As she was asking me to come and Aqorm and I were discussing how to make sure to watch the kid (because unlike Tamashii's parents, we weren't actually ecstatic about the idea of a kid roaming wilderness), Tamashii decided to play with her friend using an imaginary ball. And by that, I don't mean the two of them pantomimed throwing and

catching. Tamashii literally thought a purple ball of pure energy into being and lobbed it at Sastraneth. They caught and threw for awhile, while we debated among ourselves. “We could hire a babysitter!” I suggested. Aqorm shook her head, “On top of having to close the restaurant since nobody cooks quite like you do, we might be on this trip for a year or longer. This might make it harder to open, even given our success.” I tried again, “What about sending her to be with God? I mean, Michael is there, Portia is there, and it's probably...” Aqorm snarled, “Not happening. Michael will probably join us, so that's two minors by themselves, and I dunno how God is at raising kids but I would guess laissez-faire is an understatement.” I suggested her parents, and she shook her head there too, without offering an explanation. Then I told her that she would probably be okay at her grandma's house, but Aqorm reminded me, “Not after the Great Schism.” Sastra had been a bit of a mess when she was a kid. The elves still had a hard time forgiving us after that one! The mayhem that child got into when she was bored!

Ultimately, Ambrosia suggested that Nevras's parents were always okay with having kids around, and they would be able to keep tabs on them even if they wandered a bit, on account of the number of guards and other staff they employed. Nevras sent word by cellphone, and we were able to leave our child with her. I also contacted Michael, and after a slightly strained conversation, Michael invited Portia to spend time with her friend so things weren't quite so boring for her. As for Ambrosia, since she had really already learned her lesson, I gave her my Crest as the Oracle of Darkness.

Our group was near enough to the Aiken Monastery that this was an easy destination to head to next. We climbed up to the very top, in order to talk to the Aiken Master, but he immediately told us, “Nope. You'll need to collect all of the others first. Rules are rules, after all.” He didn't explain these rules, but Aiken apparently created an odd sort of stubbornness as he refused to change his mind despite pleading, bribing, flattering, threatening, and so on. What the people of Aiken Monastery didn’t want to do, they didn’t do unless they personally liked your reasons for convincing them to do it.

And so, we began the climb down those many stairs, before persuading the man at the bottom to open up the basement for us. With a different group than before, fighting the undead and other creatures presented different challenges. Aqorm's Twin Daggers easily defeated the solid undead for us, but they kept coming back as ghosts. Yazim Jianne, on the other hand, had few sorcery abilities to use against the likes of undead, but he was able to fend them off and prevent himself from being bitten or scratched by creating a ritual circle that fended off undead. Ambrosia had similar problems, since both she and Nevras had night blindness in the pitch black. Also, her Oracle powers didn't really work, since my Crest mostly thrived on darkness (well, except for her Hellfire abilities, which she didn't really understand) and undead were immune to the former. The Hellfire could help her, but she couldn't see, so I wasn't gonna tell that because she might miss and burn us all to dust. And then there was me. I could see normally in a dark place like this, and I could probably burn these things down. I blew some skeletons and zombies up, but then they too became ghosts. And I had to hold back because we were underground, and near rope bridges and such, and the Hellfire could burn the bridge and cause a cave-in. Selqui and Tamashii had some measure of psychic powers, so even though we did not have Azrael there, we were able to sweep away these ghosts, and Elias using Light prayers did the rest.

At last, we came to the stone in the corner of the basement. After it had been translated, it apparently said, «Believe in yourself.» Ambrosia seemed to think that this was different from what it originally read, but it didn't seem to matter. This time, there was no guardian here, so we quickly headed out. We had just completed two Crests in record time. If the rest were this easy, we should be done with our quest in no time at all!

CHAPTER 5

In which Estheriel receives some backstory.

AQORM

We put my little Sastraneth on our ship, and set a course for Phoenix. It took a few weeks, because Ambrosia was steering the ship, but somehow we got there. As usual, the island of Phoenix was raining. A thick mist covered the land, filling it with ummm thick mist. Okay, so I'm not that descriptive right now.

Sastra ran on all fours, climbing trees and shrubs like some sort of strange cat. After exploring a bit, she jumped on Lilith's back and got a piggyback ride while she napped. Lilith was willing to carry her, and soon we made it to the town of Phoenix. We stopped for a quick meal at the local restaurant, and I was surprised how much the town had changed. I had been near Aiken Monastery after all for the last nine years, so I had not seen the slow adjustments as they happened, so it seemed to me that someone had simply uprooted all the houses from before and replaced them with brick or metal high-rise buildings. At least they hadn't messed too much with the nearby rocks and hills. Phoenix had far too much character to be a tourist dump like Hinata.

Today's Phoenix was a product of globalization. This is not to say globalism. Globalism is the idea that it is a duty to take in immigrants. It is about global unity and a lockstep culture, even at the cost of one's own country and national identity. Phoenix however, rejected this. Globalization is about trade between different cultures to create healthy markets and healthy economies. Phoenix rejected globalism when the Council had fallen, and they rejected it now. Instead of permanent immigrants, Phoenix believed in trade, in viable business, in tourism, and in exchange of ideas. Phoenix kept its culture, yet also had a number of shops that sold goods from Kirin and Hinata, and restaurants that cooked foreign meals. They had no chefs from Kushiyama, but rather their own chefs bought recipes, and sold some of their own, learning to cook Hinatese *baozi* with their own variations.

Phoenix's food, for instance liked fried foods more than other countries so when the food was made locally, Phoenician bao had a fried skin, unlike the steamed bao of Hinata. This meant Phoenix was the only place one could get it cooked this way, which in turn created reasons to visit Phoenix as a tourist. Likewise, Kirin liked their food braised with covered dishes, and often used snow and ice to preserve meals. A strong national identity meant there were reasons to travel, since the entire world wasn't filled with carbon copy nations. I mean, who wants to visit Kirin after you've remade it like Zuran?

And so, the way Phoenix looked was much different from how Ghobli and Zuran looked, since Zuran had become almost like an old European village in the 18th century, while Ghobli had quickly become a trade village yet had kept much of its rural charm, updating mainly in terms of agriculture, as it borrowed some of the developments from Futanari (while keeping their citizens unchanged, of course).

We stopped at a bakery, and picked up some churros and fried ice cream, sprinkling some cinnamon on top of both. Then it was time to go. We crossed some mucky territory where the land had washed away, climbing over vines and muddy soil, before coming to a bridge. I remembered Nevras slicing up a giant of some sort long ago.

Ambrosia was in a hurry for some reason, so despite the disgusting marshland making things difficult, we just kept charging ahead and ignoring everything our path Lilith and I stopped at the entrance to Phoenix Castle, explaining to King Charis that we needed to leave Sastraneth with them because we couldn't keep her safe. She was also incredibly powerful and the writer of this book couldn't figure out what sort of abilities she had, so she got benched as just Tamashii's friend. I explained to her, "We're very sorry to do this, but we had to make sure no harm comes to you, and just know that we love you... Lilith you say something too!" Lilith flatly told her, "Suck it up, kid. Let's go Aqorm." She walked me off, all while my daughter had a vaguely pained look on her face. "I'll contact your friend Portia! You won't be alone, I promise!" I said as I got dragged off.

Ambrosia was apparently trying for a speed-run of her quest, since she made it to the temple of Apollo in record time. In fact, most of the humans in our party were wheezing and coughing after the exercise. Even if she wasn't any stronger, nine years of farming had apparently conditioned her body so she had more more endurance. We made it to the door, and opened up. Apollo sat once again front of his mirror and looked at us. And then, like before, he spoke, "I see you've done well against attacks from outside, and you've managed to curb your desire to ruthlessly slaughter. Yet there is still one thing

you must master. You must defend your life against yourself." I wasn't Ambrosia so I wasn't always sure what these people meant, but it sounded like the Oracle was trying to tell her that an important part of this "death ground" theory discussed before was to guard against suicidal thoughts and tendencies. In any case, whatever they were saying was quickly lost, since upon seeing Ambrosia with Tamashii, the old man launched into a seeming tangent. He said, "So... You've returned? I see you haven't learned your lesson either, for I see you've birthed a child. It must be killed." Not only did this not seem to follow what he had just said, but it didn't even match any of his previous teachings! The sacrificial child answered in a cheery voice, "Hey there!" Ambrosia blinked, "Must be **killed**?!? But didn't you say... I could have sworn..." She must have noticed this contradiction as well. He nodded as though no such logical problem existed, "Correct, all who live undergo suffering. Suffering is cruel, and thus they must be put out of their misery, for this is true mercy!" I thought about this mentality, and how as odd as it sounded when *he* said it, it was applied quite often to suffering pets or euthanasia for people. Eventually, it got so bad that people wanted to sedate babies because they were crying. Fortunately for Tamashii, this idea freaked Ambrosia out. With her eyes wide open in fear, she shook her head vigorously, "I think a lot of people have the impression that kindness is the use of strength to end the suffering of others. But strength is kindness, not the other way around. I must have strength enough to preserve my own life, but kindness enough to preserve the lives of those I love." He said, "Nice to see you learned something from your quest. Keep that in mind." Another glowing mark appeared on her Crest. "Mommy," asked Tamashii "can I get a tattoo like the one you have?" Ambrosia nodded, then shook her head, "Not from **this** guy, you can't."

ESTHERIEL

At one time, I was a very loyal servant of the Lord. But I stopped caring about his plan, and started on my own when I saw all of the evil humans were capable of. Let's be clear. I'm not some generic cackling villain. In this world, all I want is to see humans and animals have a sense of justice and mercy. Suffering and sadness is all I have seen instead. I'd seen things, like rejection, or cats dying after twenty years of love and care, or people being really distant to each other. I was determined to make the world a better place, a place where such sadness did not exist, where all could enjoy the world and all it brought without such evil things as death, or pain, or free will.

Memories of my past surfaced. I had been a female immortal known as Freya almost as long as I had been a sexless angel. As an angel, my memories spanned several eons, but I recalled a particular incident. My story begins years ago, when I did my service to the poor. I loved humans, then, and even today, I still do. But there were to be some problems with helping them... I forget what the town was named, for human towns all run together in my mind. I am the archangel concerned most with Justice, and much of my journeys take me to remote towns to aid the sick, and to avenge wrongs. In an alley between the town streets, children were suffering. Some had bites from insects, some had cuts and bruises, and some had signs of the Plague, centuries after it had cured for most of the population. Such were conditions among the poor in this town. And so, God asked me to intervene. I probably would have, even without his permission.

The Plague is not some generic disease, as one might expect from its prosaic name. Rather, it was named this because like the Great War was thought to be, the Plague was the last disease that actually troubled mankind. Shortly after the Plague, human beings came into contact with elves. Or rather, *because* of the Plague. As much as elves loathed humans for their rampant development of ecosystems into cities, humans as a species were having a terrible time. Besides, the symptoms of the Plague were particularly nasty. The symptoms were a discoloration that started forming on the head or arms and legs, and gradually spread to other organs. Comparisons were made to leprosy, in that it produced changes in the body structure, as well as producing sores and pigmentation. But unlike leprosy, the Plague did not involve loss of limbs through weakening of bones and muscles. Instead, the opposite happened. The body formed new muscles, flesh, and bones. These manifested in spike-like bone protrusions from the body that would continue to grow until the person couldn't move their arms without poking themselves. It

was sometimes called the “porcupine disorder” due to the spikes creating a major nuisance in everyday life. Victims of it would usually die in their sleep, as the spikes poked the body and caused internal bleeding. If not, the spines would grow more spines, until the body tore itself to shreds.

The humans of the day were just guessing with regard to treatment, until a few elves led by the healer Siofra Athanasius decided to teach a few humans the mystic arts. This was after God granted the latent ability of thaumaturgy. Some healers had already figured this out, but this was the point where humans began to be formally trained in the working of mystic power. You must understand, this was a time period where aura was only vaguely known by humans, where elves mostly still hid themselves, where people still believed the old world nonsense about “germs” rather than correctly identifying the cause of illness as runes and evil spirits. At the time, this disease was able to continue because so few people knew healing. This was why they were so eager to help.

The Plague had come like most diseases, from one person not taking care of himself. Unlike humans, angels understood the origin of disease. It was not from “germs” but from the immune system running itself down. At all times, humans were carriers to all sorts of bacteria and viruses. They were constantly inside the body, yet the average person remained healthy so long as they were not overworked, overtired, overstressed, underfed, or dehydrated. When the body was worn down, it would naturally become incapacitated, but it did so through its immune system being unable to keep a bacteria or virus population in check. If the seasonal weather was overly hot or cold, it was the right climate for certain pathogens to replicate. Likewise, since stress was a factor in health, a society that was in a bad mood could perpetuate illness. And there was another thing**:** disease *wasn't* actually contagious. Enough people believed it could spread, so a sort of informal rune was created, causing 瘟 to float around the air. But really, what was outside the body could not make one sick, only what was inside the body.

This is why runes could deal with any illness, because for the most part disease was code, and could simply edit out the problem. Removing illness was not a matter of researching specific diseases as it had been in the past, but simply to put the immune system on overdrive until it naturally culled the population of pathogens. And they could erase runes that produced psychosomatic reactions.

While I did not remember details about humans or the towns they lived in, all of the names of the people I encountered were known to me. There was a little boy with short brown hair suffering from worms named Schweinedämon Scheißkerl, or Schwein for short. There was a little girl with a red skirt and what used to be a nice white blouse that had since turned brown from sleeping in the dirt who had cuts and bruises from life on the street, named Punduris Neglīts. Punduris was her family name though, and everyone called her Neg. There was an older boy with a bandanna around his head suffering under the Plague named Wūyā Yāojing. But everyone called him Bird for some reason (probably because his short quills from the Plague resembled feathers). Oddly enough, all of these kids with bizarre names I had no trouble remembering, but there was another child, a teenager with blue hair who only recently became homeless, who somehow had no troubles despite having suffered all of the same conditions. Ah, now I remember. The name of the town was Galaxia.

I healed these children, each in turn. But human nature is able to see inequity where there is none. “No fair!” said Schwein, “I was suffering way worse, but that angel healed you more!” He turned to the girl Neg, and beat her up for his insane jealousy. Being a street kid, she had no crying or screaming, she gave back what pain she was given. Soon, two of them were lying bruised on the ground. I protested, “I healed all of you the same. Stop fighting!” Instead, now that I technically healed those other two more, the other boy, Bird, joined in, and soon all three were lying on the ground.

I didn't know what to do. If I healed them, they'd probably beat each other to death when they recovered. If they sat there untouched, they might recover, but they might also slowly die in agony. It was this day that I decided this world shouldn't have such things as pain and suffering. And so, I used my Script, saying, “***Eternal Slumber - Duration: Instant***.” This was a Script that had rarely been used because it basically made someone who was suffering gradually fall asleep and stay alive forever yet comatose. It was the

closest thing angels had to a death spell without doing something that might turn them into a demon. It was that day when I decided, that this world was unjust and I would work for a better one, a world where nobody had to suffer agony, rejection, despair, or any sort of torment. The human life was so full of sadness.

AMBROSIA

We made our way back to Phoenix, when we got a letter of challenge. At least, I think it was a letter of challenge. It read, « 約束の時間に直接会いましょう。» Elias could have translated it, but I didn't take it seriously, and tossed it into the trash. This was the beginning of our troubles.

TOSHIRO

I possibly should not tell you this, as it might blow my cover, but I am a ninja. Or rather, I was the grandson of the leader of our Clan. I was only ten but I knew when I saw that purple-haired girl that I wanted to date her. But her mother tossed my note challenging her to date in the trash without so much as looking at it. Yes, I probably should have bothered to learn Common, but even so, I felt that I deserved an answer.

Now, normally ninjas work by contract, but unlike bounty hunters, there was a certain amount of leeway for personal ambitions. We are freelance workers, after all. We don't work with posters or anything like that, our clients simply write down their wishes, and we carry it out. Any mission, even walking a dog or seducing someone would be accepted. If we died, our mission was transferred to the next ninja, and the next, until it was either completed or all of us were dead. Failure to reward us, however, was something only fools did. I pity the fool.

I shadowed them for days, dressed the first time as the waitress at a bar, again as a beggar on the street, and again as a jester who was juggling fire in the street. Changing height, sex, and physical appearance was normally impossible for people using runes because of Original Intent, but as a ninja, I was doing something entirely different. This was a technique of Body Control. Every ninja knew it. Even the lesser elemental ninjas understood this much, along with basic stealth techniques. But the most powerful can use scrolls, elementalism, vanishing tricks, and *qi* to enhance our martial arts. Walking on water was easy for the likes of us, as was punching a wall down with a glowing fist.

Frustrated with being ignored (even though it was the nature of a ninja to be low profile), I even just showed up as myself in a black ninja uniform. I should have been used to being ignored, but having a potential love interest shun me was another matter. I issued another letter, bumping into them on the streets of Galaxia and stuffing it in their pockets so quickly that it didn't even land in their pockets until I was long gone.

AMBROSIA

We got another letter, which read, « あなたは三船一族の忍者を侮辱し、私を侮辱しました。五つの風を送ります。» This one, Elias snatched up and read before I could get rid of it. He translated, “'You have insulted the Mifune Clan ninjas, and you have insulted me. I will send the five winds after you.' Oh wait, sorry, I think he meant the Five Elements. I think whatever the first letter said, you should have done it.”

I ignored him too. Elias was being like a nervous old woman, making a big fuss over... Nevermind. I first encountered problems when I was trying to order tea, and there were these women dancing around with fans to entertain the guests. The tea kinda tasted gross, and I felt a bit drowsy. They continued to dance as I started to nod in my chair, until one of them lost hold of a fan somehow, and it whizzed past my head. I decided it was probably an accident, though she did have a strong arm I suppose, because the fan embedded itself in the table. That, uhhh, kinda shouldn't be possible.

The others continued to dance, spinning faster and faster, creating a strong draft around them. I put up my arms defensively, reflexively using Apollo's Crest. Even though it was not exactly magic, the wind storm didn't seem to care, breaking apart the gust. The dancing ladies appeared shocked. After all, it was not their fault that they were moving too fast. We thanked them for their performance, and left the restaurant. Walking around helped shake off some of my sleepiness, and no sooner did I walk a few blocks than some men in full-body gold jumpsuits that hid their hair and face literally

appeared out of thin air. They ran around us at high speed, tossing shovel-shaped blades into the air. Elias called them kunai, but I knew. They were shovel-shaped knives.

Now, I would normally be able to seamlessly sidestep out of the way of even this huge amount of falling knives, but I could feel a strong wind holding me in place. I couldn't move away, I couldn't move aside, and in fact I couldn't move at all. In fact, this should have been curtains for me, ending with me winding up with tiny daggers embedded in my body, but two things happened.

First, Aqorm threw knives of her own, knocking several of them aside. At the same moment, she used her elf Protection powers to create a cushion against attack. Normally, this could actually stop attacks, but she kinda threw it up with zero preparation.

Then, Nevras rushed forward and bashed at me hard with his shield. It knocked me forward, but I was no longer fixed in place. Elias was on the scene, slapping all us with a Bless prayer. My body was not only stronger and more resistant, but it felt somehow more solid somehow, able to stand up to the wind. These ninjas advanced all all of us, but it felt like they were moving in slow motion. I caught up with some of the nearest, and slashed at them, as did Aqorm, Nevras, and Lilith. There were only about three left, so they changed tactics. They made some sort of hand motions. Normally, from what I saw of cast magic, it involved drawing runes to a location, saying the words of the spell or prayer, and making broad sweeping gestures to guide the runes in the proper direction. On the other hand, I couldn't see any runes here, but instead it looked more like one of Nevras's techniques. The only real difference was that they were using their hands to make little gestures, swapping the gesture every second or so for another. I couldn't really see the flurry of hand motions, but judging from Elias's face, he couldn't tell what they were doing either. A whirlwind formed and gradually grew bigger, and while those of us nearby tried to attack them, all we got for our troubles was dents or burns in logs that were now sitting where they were standing. Meanwhile, the mini-tornado was enough of an issue that we decided to leave the area before it got bigger.

Whoever those guys were, I'm sure they wouldn't be troubling us any longer. Nope, a whole *new* group of creeps decided to bother us. We walked across the bridge hoping to flee from the assassins who had pursued us before, but near the riverbank between the two cliffs we saw some bamboo straws extending from the water. All of a sudden, the water bubbled up in a way that was unnatural, almost like there were geysers in the middle of a river. These assassins emerged from the water in soft blue uniforms, climbing the cliffs with nets and spears. “Let's blow up the bridge!” said Lilith, but I refused her. This bridge was built by Nevras's family, and while it was kind of a crappy rope bridge that could probably stand to be rebuilt, its sentimental value was everything. All the same, before the battle had proceeded very far, this bridge did in fact fall, and in the next few days after our battle, we would halt our journey until the bridge could be rebuilt, staying in the town of Phoenix until it was finished.

But this is a tale for later. Right now, the bridge was destroyed, with us on it. The assassins that challenged us which Elias said were “ninjas” (I was still skeptical) cut all four sides of the bridge at once, causing it to fall into the water together, rather than sway to a side or the other. They must have really wanted it gone!

We landed with a plop in the water, and the bridge bobbed up and down, with us standing on it. My legs hurt from the fall, and the rope from the bridge threatened to tangle around our legs and drown us. I was off balance, so I was hopeless at using my Crests right now, since they needing all sorts of precise stepping, and I wasn't too good at dodging in water either. It was a terrible place to fight, as everyone's balance was off, and things like Nevras's techniques and wonder-working was difficult to use. We swam in the direction of the coastline. The island of Phoenix was actually three smaller islands, joined together with this now-cut rope bridge between the island with Phoenix and the island of Phoenix Castle, and joined again by a thin strip of land. The southern island, unlike the cliff areas here, was a much lower elevation. If we could just make it to there, we would be safe... But as we swam, we hadn't the balance to fight effectively. These ninjas (I guess I had to admit it) had no such restriction. With some sort of technique, they arose and stood on the surface of the water, and began to walk as if it were ice. Elias

marveled at their faith, just before two netted us, other ninjas with spears approaching from behind.

AQORM

I was in the same net as Ambrosia and Nevras, who were squabbling about whose fault it was that we used this bridge. Lilith was heavy enough to be in her own net, while Elias and Yazim Jianne were together. Tamashii was in a net with the Elias and the sorcerer, but her small body managed to squeeze through the netting. Selqui had slipped underwater. We were in a bad position right now. Tamashii did some sort of shield around herself and slipped beneath the waves. It looked like one or two of these ninjas dove in after her, but I saw a few underwater explosions and some steaming water. No more went after her, so I hope she was alright!

This really wasn't the most pressing concern right now, though. That would be the swinging inside a net while people with spears were coming to impale us. We had to do something fast. We were caught, and we were trapped in a situation of despair. Danger was all around us, and closing in. There was nothing we could do.

And yet we had to keep moving, we had to keep struggling. No matter how hopeless, how pointless, or how depressing things seemed... the people I cared about were a part of this. More than myself, I wanted them to be safe. Sastraneth would not be the same if she lost her parents. And I would not be the same if Lilith wound up getting hurt, even flawed as she was. I struggled against the nets with all I had.

Hanging in a bag though I was, I told the others, “Shut up!” Ambrosia and Nevras stopped bickering, and watched me as I rocked back and forth. Then they began to do the same, trying desperately to rock the net out of the holder's hand. The ninjas with all the spears were edging ever closer, while those with the nets yelled, “Stop that! They might get away.” We had to keep moving no matter what they tried, and we had to wait for our chance. The ninjas were strong after all, strong enough to carry several us in a bag, so they were definitely strong enough to throw Lilith, and that is precisely what that one did. He needed both hands free to use his elemental powers, after all.

Lilith landed with a thud in the cliff face, creating a small indentation in the rock, where her body rested instead of falling into the water below.. The ninja ignored her and turned his attention to us, using his hands to control the nearby water and send it towards us. They wanted to splash us enough to knock us out. They didn't know who they were dealing with. Sure, the jet of water came towards us, but I reached out my hand and touched it. Or rather, what I touched was the water below me, which touched the jet.

My geomancy didn't just work on the ground. Water had energy too, and all water had a tendency to bond together. The water they moved was still connected to the water below us. It was all over for them. The water froze, starting with what I touched, and returning to the main body of water, then fanning out in a circle around us. The ninjas holding the bag slipped and fell, sliding off the ice, and straight into the water. They couldn't help it, each of them holding us was carrying a burden, and despite their attempts to float atop the water, they were exerting an upward force on the water to create surface tension while a downward force was pushing them forward. We fell on the ice, and they slid off, straight into the waters where Selqui was waiting for them. Electricity charged the water, hurting all of them but a lone ninja who wasn't carrying anything. This one used the frozen water, creating insulation against all that voltage. Tamashii surfaced, apparently having been victorious earlier, and apparently shielding herself from all that electricity and water. She seemed exhausted from all her efforts though, and probably wouldn't be able to protect herself. The ninja prepared to attack her, when behind us was a loud growling sound. Lilith was pissed.

Demons have a number of powers and abilities, but aside from their Hellfire, their strongest ability was the ability to Berserk. Their eyes glowed bright red (including the sclera) for a Minor Berserk and deep black for a Major Berserk. The first was temporary, but the second was usually permanent without serious therapy. Demons only went into a Major Berserk only when something put them in such a state of rage or sorrow that they were inconsolable. They could distinguish friend and foe, but only barely, and they would be unable to calm down without serious help, and given to fits of screaming or

crying, as well as practically unable to calm down. As Lilith snarled, her red eyes glowed, and her body was cloaked in a black aura. She charged forward, running along the cliff walls, then ran so fast that her body refused to sink in the water. The ninja fired shot after shot of water and ice at her, and then pelted her with shuriken. None of it did any good, she rushed past the ninja, tearing it to shreds with one swipe. She tore up any remaining ninjas with spears, and stopped and sniffed. She looked around, and finding no enemies, screamed into the air. I grabbed her by the waist, "Shhhhhh... It's okay. Tamashii is over there. I'm okay. All of us are fine. We're safe now." Her Berserk had been a mix of fear for our safety, and annoyance at getting bashed into a wall. But as quickly as such feelings rose, they went away. I was thankful nobody was really hurt. We swam towards the shore, following Tamashii.

I had remembered, though, that there were supposedly five types of these ninjas. One for every stage of grief, I joked to myself. You know: *denial*, *depression*, *anger*, *withdrawal*, and *apathy*. I think that's what they were. All of these stages, including the last, must be overcome. Just as all those ninjas needed to be killed, and whoever sent them. Odds were, there were probably some on shore too.

We swam to shore, noticing some eels with sharp teeth swimming towards us. The eels curved to the right and left, steadily moving closer, until at last... Selqui speared the lot of them in rapid succession. We made it to shore, and had roasted eel for dinner. It felt odd to be on the same island as when we had just visited the shrine of the Oracle, but I guess this was how things had to be. We passed the building, entering a large field of flowers of a bright red color. As we edged closer, the flowers got redder and redder, and the area felt strangely warm. Then I noticed the same sort of rippling of the air as would be true of the inside of a a stove. The flowers themselves started smoking, and soon most of the island was on fire. I pulled out my knives and moved towards one of the red-garbed ninjas only to have them turn into balls of fire and teleport away. I changed position, but it kept happening, and they'd often appear behind us and attack us with shuriken or burning paper. Or we'd try to attack these guys, then it would turn out the whole thing was an illusion and we were attacking our friends. Damn it, enough was enough! I screamed, "**I have had it with these motherfuckin' ninjas on this motherfuckin' plain**!" I managed to launch myself in the air, and it looked like I was almost about to reach one of them, when I got hit in midair when that one used the Art of the Fire Wheel. I was pretty badly burned, but I would live. Thankfully, my midsection too the brunt of that, and I was wearing Lilith's dress, which after the last one had basically been destroyed, she instead contracted some tailors to turn that dragonscale into a few outfits. I had burns on my face, and my skin around where my dress was also stung, but no worse than a jellyfish bite. I was however knocked off balance, and likely wouldn't move again for most of the battle. Elias tended my wounds while I withdrew to the water to cool my feet and hands.

Now that we were on solid ground though, the others could use their attacks. Tamashii used her Telekinesis, yet they kept shifting their location until finally she tried her flame abilities to set them on fire. It seemed as though these ninjas were largely immune to their own element though. We would need to try something else. Yazim Jianne managed to fend them off with his sorcery, using temporal spells to freeze some of them in place, reverse their movements, and even managed to dispense some of them with a Meteor Shower and some with a Tachyon Burst. But he could only use spells that he had prepared ahead of time, and today he hadn't set up many offensive effects. And besides which, they kept teleporting from danger only to set more fires around us. If only there was some way to... And then, I had an idea.

You see, as anyone who has been alive for thousands of years with nothing but massive amounts of books knows, flame-based magic follows all of the laws of thermodynamics. In simplest terms, a Fire spell needs a fuel source to last more than a few seconds, it needs to be in an area that is warm, dry, and insulated from the elements, it operates more effectively in a small space, and it needs air in order to ignite.

This meant that I could effectively cancel their power by getting rid of one of a few things, either the air, the fuel, or the aridity. I wanted to breathe, so the first one is out,

but raising the humidity and lowering the fuel amount were viable options. And so, I whispered my plan to the others. I had to tell it a couple times though.

First, Ambrosia and Lilith used darkness effects to kill all grass and turn this field filled with flowers into a lifeless waste. And then, because they also could ignite the air itself, I used my geomancy to add the water that I was standing in to the air. This greatly increased the humidity to that of the other island. The stream bed dried up until the next rain and a few fish at the shallower parts wound up being beached, but it was totally worth it for them to not be able to attack. After that, we defeated them easily. We left the island, and headed to a well-forested area. I expected we might deal with some green ninjas here. That is, if things kept up like they had been doing.

As predicted, when we walked too near a group of old spruce trees, some men (and probably women too, though all of them were well-concealed) phased through the bark of the trees to throw some ropes with hooks at us. Unlike the others, they didn't seem to be overly violent, but they did appear to have a strong desire to keep us restrained. And drugged, apparently. They reached into bags and spread what appeared to be some sort of mushroom spores, scattering it into the wind. And then, I lost all sensation...

I narrate this passage hours later, since at the time, I was in no condition to do much of anything. Half-elves and elves are both extremely resistant to most actual toxins, but hallucinogens are another matter. Angels are not much better, although they are able to purge drugs quickly as a result of a heightened metabolism. Demons are a different matter since their internal organs are basically inert, and mermaids don't react to many land toxins. This is why Lilith and Selqui were able to fight them off while the rest of us were out of it. I was in better shape than those humans though, they were hopeless for up to six hours, with Ambrosia having the worst of it. My trip only lasted 30 minutes, and it was relatively mild. Aside from some intense queasiness similar to just eating rotten mushrooms, I just had a few minor hallucinations. One involved a pentagon or triangle or some kind of angled shape that I was too messed up to put into words at the time that appeared to be burning in electric blue flames. The other had what appeared to be grains of rice that gradually wriggled like maggots. I heaved, and it was out of my system.

There's three major types of hallucinogens: psychedelics, dissociatives, and deliriants. Psychedelics are things like peyote that simply heighten the senses, allowing things to kind of run together. Interestingly, this is much how Heaven was, with its intense colors and sounds. Deliriants allowed the senses as (mostly) normal but distorted perception of reality, so you would think your piano session was awesome when it wasn't or that friendly people were out to get you. Most magic mushrooms (not to be confused with mushrooms sought after for restoring mystic power), on the other hand are dissociatives, which rather than augment reality and the senses, would basically cut off the senses. In other words, it was like a dream in that it was difficult to pick up outside stimuli. For the entire duration that Ambrosia was under the influence, she was unable to see or hear me, even though her eyes were open. This was probably why they used it, it was an easy way to attack people and not have them fight back while they were withdrawn into their own fantasies. Whether they attacked or ran off, they had all the time in the world.

After they finally pulled out of it, Lilith, Selqui, and I gave them a meal, since those five had nothing to eat or drink in hours. They “woke up” to find dead bodies all around, so I'm not sure this was an ideal way to come out of their altered state. But well, death is part of this life, I guess. After a meal of grain-bean buns and water, they were ready to go. We marched along as the forests turned to a stretch of soft clay. Surely they could be no danger here. The ground looked so soft and welcoming!

AMBROSIA

I stomped around in the soft clay with my boots, heedless that anything was wrong. We'd fought off four ninjas so far, so I figured that I could probably just accept the way things were going because our group would take care of matters anyway. I must have rubbed against a rock, I figured, because my boot tore near the front. I looked down. The “stone” appeared to be pretty flat, metallic, and pretty much a spear. The rest of us stepped back as a series of spears moved up and down randomly along the clay, retreating

back to the grass. We were safe there, near the territory of the green ninjas. The wood ninjas were defeated, and for the most part dead. But *they* didn't know that.

After few seconds of hitting nothing, ninjas in brown garments popped out of the ground, leaving a vacuum that sucked the dirt where the clay had been behind them. They attacked us with their spears and chucked *kunai* daggers and shuriken at us, but after facing down all those other ninjas, I dodged with ease. Oh yeah, and some of the others did too. Seeing that wasn't working, one of the ninjas (who appeared to be the leader since he had a black outfit instead of brown) pulled out a long scythe fastened to a metallic orb with a long chain and began swinging it at me. He also appeared to have much more skill than the others. My normal dodges didn't work all that great. Whenever he swung the thing my body moved almost automatically in response to planned action, while attacks that happened as a consequence of another attack I had less than ideal reflexes against. I was getting bashed quite a few times when this chain swung its sphere and hit my shoulder and stomach. It was all I could do to block the thing from hitting my head. And to make matters worse, I risked injury to my arm every time I did so.

The others weren't doing much better. Those other ninjas did a bunch of weird hand motions and started shifting rocks around underground, causing rockslides that landed most of them on all fours while they tried to toss large stones at them. Spending a huge amount of effort using Telekinesis against multiple boulders, Tamashii stopped this until finally she was spent. When normal people used psionic powers, it tended to explode their brains, but Soulfires could do so easily. Still, doing it too often did tend to drain them. My daughter was exhausted and deserved to sleep. "Elias," I said, "take my daughter to safety. Phoenix Castle should be nearby. Nevras's parents should be able to help her out." When Tamashii had shown herself to be a powerful Soulfire, Vickie, as she now insisted I call her since we were family, had revealed to me that she also had some ability with this, and had trained her every now and then, at least enough that she was not a danger to herself or others. She would know how to help Tamashii. The downside is, Tamashii was probably the best person to help against these freaks. But now she's gone. We will have to cope somehow on our own.

While we were occupied getting my precious to safety, they'd done something with the soil, mixing it differently, so the lower layers of lime and sand were now on top, and the clay was on the bottom. Since the leader had control over earth and water, he quickly took advantage of their actions and turned this into quicksand. Quicksand only forms when the right type of sand becomes filled with water. This usually happens when it is in a sink hole or hollow in the ground that is made out of material such as clay that does not allow the water to drain from the sand. That was pretty much exactly our situation, so down we went. Lilith managed to jump atop some trees, and she was safe for now. Aqorm likewise figured out what was going on, and used geomancy to save herself. The rest of us were not so lucky. We got stuck in the quicksand.

Like a fool, I kicked and struggled, having not read any survival manuals on how to deal with quicksand. And Elias wasn't here to help us with his infinite information about usually useless stuff that would probably be really handy right now. I looked for help from Yazim Jianne, our second smartest team member, but I forgot that he was immoral and unlikely to help anyone but himself and Selqui. Yazim Jianne simply teleported himself and her away in the direction of Phoenix Castle, leaving us to deal with this crap.

I tried to pretend nothing was wrong. I screamed and I raged. I bargained with God to help to get me out of there, forgetting for a moment that I *was* God (I also had apparently forgotten that the job of being God equipped me with a Console that could literally reshape all matter in the universe to my whims, leaving that thing in the bottom of my backpack). I began to cry. And then finally, about waist deep, I decided I was completely cool with this, that I didn't care anymore. Like many other fools following the old model of the Five Stages of Grief, I believed I had found acceptance. Actually, I had simply stumbled into a state of apathy and had basically submitted to my fate. I continued to believe that I had found contentment. The only other person left in the quicksand was Nevras, and he had fallen over on his back and was struggling. I couldn't watch, believing that he would sink immediately in that position. I turned away, sinking

a bit more in the process. At this point, I was nearly up to my chest. The good news was it appeared that I hit bottom. The bad news? Well, it was getting hard to breathe.

"Hey! Hey dumbass!" I heard Aqorm's rude voice. "Ambrosia, I'm talking to you!" she said. I glared at her, and tried to retort, but realized by lungs could only expand so much, and my voice was tiny, "How rude! What gives you... ***gasp*** the right... to..." Aqorm scoffed, "Are you going to spend the rest of your life in there? The Ambrosia I know wouldn't give up like that!" I was tired, I was out of breath, but now I was angry. She continued, "Nevras already figured a way out. But I guess I expected too much of you. He calmed down, *relaxed*, and thought things through. But I don't think you can do it."

She was probably right. It was hopeless. I coughed. But at this moment, I decided that instead of consigning myself to my fate, I'd try a few things. First, I tried to loosen things up, pulling off my backpack and chucking it towards solid ground. I lucked out, and it didn't fall into the muck to never be seen again. Instead, Nevras caught it. I also tossed my knife (that was originally his) at him. He flinched out of the way, and it almost fell in the soft sand, but he managed to fish it out at the last possible second. Casting my fishing rod, I managed to coil it around Aqorm, trying to pull myself towards her. "No, stop, you idiot!" she said, "You're dragging me in with you!" It turns out that while it's possible for someone else to pull you up with a rope through quicksand, from where I was standing, I might as well be surrounded by cement. Nevertheless, it was probably a good thing that I tried this. Aqorm cut the line suddenly, and the force knocked me off balance, causing me to flop on top of the sand. I remembered Aqorm's hint about relaxing, and realized that what Nevras was doing earlier had been intentional. I lay on my back, and called out to Aqorm, "What do I do now?" She explained that I had to back stroke, which I kinda was really bad at since I'm the sort of swimmer that caused God to repeatedly reset after I fell in. After trying and almost losing balance, Nevras chopped a nearby branch and handed it to me. I grabbed hold and he pulled while I tried my best to keep my head above the sand. He dragged me out, and I tried to get all the gunk out of my scalp. My hair was all oily from all our exertion too. I'd need to wash it soon.

The Earth ninjas hadn't made any moves during all this time. They expected the quicksand to take care of us, and they didn't seem to care much. But now that I was out, it was time to use my newfound acceptance to totally trash these guys. Because that's how acceptance works. After slaughtering them with my Oracle powers and the rest of us joining in the gang up on them, Nevras and I shared an embrace. I was tempted to make a *Star Wars* joke about not liking sand, but I figured right now it was far more important to just get the heck out of here, and get a decent shower.

YAZIM JIANNE

I teleported directly to the castle, and wandered the grounds before setting my eye on Tamashii and Elias. You must understand, while I did have time/space powers, the ability to set up rituals, and Void spells, I wasn't actually very useful in battle. Oh sure, as a sorcerer, I also had abilities of an Onmyouji, but most of these powers boiled down necromancy, curses, and various charms, or using *shikigami*. I couldn't use necromancy because it was forbidden by most local ordinances. And unlike Azrael, I had nothing in the way of direct elemental ability, but I could only make a fire by compressing air to release a tiny explosion of heat. My actual defenses were limited to a completely overkill Meteor Shower or the super-speed Tachyon Burst (which wasn't very powerful), some force effects like Magic Arrow, some Void abilities... okay, maybe I have a some abilities after all, but that battle was still no place for me. I regret nothing.

I set up a ritual to restrain and properly align mental energies. Soulfires tended to destroy property if their powers resurfaced during a nightmare, and she had fallen asleep after using her powers to their fullest extent during a series of stressful events. When she awoke, I hoped she would be recovered. It was a shame that those others probably hadn't made it. Too bad... I guess I would just have to quit the group and go home after all. And Tamashii would be mine. Mine to train, mine to cultivate into a powerful sorcerer, since the powers of a Soulfire were a more undisciplined version of my own powers. And when she was of age, she would become an heir to the research of Selqui and I.

Such power... Surely, Ambrosia wouldn't mind... An hour later, the rest of the group arrived, and I do not believe that they looked happy with my retreat. Ambrosia cracked her knuckles, and soon I was covered in bruises. Hmmm, perhaps I miscalculated?

TAMASHII

I tossed and turned as I dreamed, while I slept in my paternal grandfather's guest bedroom. I possessed psychic powers so I could remember all my dreams, and sometimes have lucid dreams if I was awake enough. I could even enter the dreams of others sometimes. But my nightmares often seized control of me and wouldn't let go. And when I had used my Soulfire powers frequently, any dream was fair game. The dream started okay but quickly turned south. It was usually this same dream.

I was standing in a field surrounded by my friends. Mom was eating some fish with Dad, and Portia with sitting next to me holding my hand and chatting, while I talked to her and Sastra. My brain added in details when I woke, so I think we were talking about whether a swallow could migrate while carrying a coconut or not. Sastra insisted it could probably do this if it were an African Swallow, but anyway the conversation wasn't that important. The important part was that all of our friends, even Yazim Jianne, were nearby on this picnic, and all of us were enjoying ourselves. Suddenly, Yazim Jianne disappeared. I didn't notice immediately, because he was kind of an asshole, even if he was our asshole. Then Selqui disappeared and I noticed that a bit more, as she could occasionally be sweet to me. One by one, the others vanished, starting with my mom's friends, then my direct family and my friends. I panicked, as Portia screamed, "Tamashii, help!" Sastra disappeared before she knew what was happening. I looked around, and the nice spring picnic scene was suddenly changed. It was cold, it was dark, and it was windy. "Somebody!" I yelled, "Somebody!"

"Somebody! Somebody!" I called out, rising suddenly from my bed. I awoke to find my mother standing nearby Yazim Jianne and Elias, with all the others. Portia was nearby looking concerned, and even Sastra had somehow come here despite the collapse of the bridge. Elias was performing some sort of healing, while Yazim Jianne appeared to be involved in a ritual. Mom appeared to be relieved that he hadn't just run away from battle while I was out, but was actually helping. Though I'm not certain what he had been doing. Whatever it was, it looked like he had been injured for his efforts.

Now that everyone was up, we sought an audience from King Charis and Queen Victoria. You know, my grandma and grandpa. Something about the bridge getting wrecked by ninjas and having no means of getting back to the town or the port. They did manage to ship us, along with Sastraneth and Portia, to the main town of Phoenix, but Dad forbade us from leaving until the island had a working bridge. "It's our civic duty to watch the progress of the bridge, since the king himself will rebuild it. With a number of skilled carpenters and other help, of course," he said. The rope bridge of Phoenix had been built about 30 years ago, and the rope had already felt like it was ready to fray at the time we last walked over it. King Charis intended to build a stone bridge and the huge bridge ought to be done in a few days, since he had contracted not only professional architects but also Earth ninjas. Considering it took years to build a bridge of this length back in the day, this was pretty good progress. With just the builders hired, it would have been a nightmare. In any case, it looked like we were stuck here for the time being.

CHAPTER 6

In which the entire group pauses the quest to hang out. And there are flashbacks.

TAMASHII

We stopped in town for a bit. We were waiting on those repairs, after all. The others of our group still were out there somewhere, though I think we can find Michael pretty easily. My friend Portia lives in Phoenix area with us, but every now and then, her father dragged her up to Heaven. Portia was the first female angel in ages, so she was basically a celebrity. Michael wanted her to occasionally meet some important powers or dominions, but she always came back bored.

Speaking of Portia, since we were in Phoenix, and just had completed the awakening of a few of Mom's Crests, I was wanting to hang out with my friends, since I wanted a break. “Hey, Mom...” I looked at her with my best sweet and innocent face ever. “Oh great,” she muttered, “yes, daughter?” I could tell she was less-than-thrilled at what she knew might be a major imposition. She was a good mother and protected me, often eating potentially dangerous foods first or throwing herself in front of critters so I didn't get hurt. But she could be stubborn. “I was wondering, might I visit my friends? After all, you've got your friends here and we don't really need to rush.” Nevras was typically the soft touch in the family, and he was patient and kind in everything he did from carpentry to working on farming. He had a sort of Fred Rogers mindset to life, while Ambrosia wasn't very nurturing and could be stern. I knew immediately that he would probably oblige, and sure enough he said, “I see no reason why not. Ambrosia can have down-time with Aqorm, Yazim, Selqui, and Lilith. And I can visit my parents while they build the bridge...” “No, you may not,” Mom interrupted, glaring at her husband, “the sooner we get done with this quest, the sooner we can all go home. Then you can spend as much time with your friends as you want. I do **not** want to spend months or years on this quest. Not like last time.” While I was mature enough actually to understand short-term versus long-term reasoning... I was nine after all. Of course I wouldn't go along with that decision. Understanding that reasoned discussion wasn't going to yield any results, it was time to bring out the big guns.

“Uuuuuuuuwwwwwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh~” I screamed and cried, a high-pitched ear-splitting sound. After a few minutes, I cried again. And then again, just for good measure. I cried not for sympathy, but because I knew my mother absolutely *hated* the sound of me crying, complaining every time I did it. Something about being kept up nights with no sleep, combined with the fact that I could talk at a very young age and didn't need to cry. Back then, I did have some emotional issues despite developing early, but here I was just doing crocodile tears. Mom caved, “Dammit, Tamashii! Alright, stop, you can visit your friends. We'll watch the bridge being built, while you go have fun.”

“Don't do that again,” Mom threatened. Mom didn't usually spank me or anything, but I did get scolded and put in the corner a lot. As I grew older and had friends, I got grounded and they forbade them from coming. I wasn’t spanked unless I was risking my own life or someone else's, as I found out that one time. I understood better than some of the modern “experts” on raising children that there was a time and place for discipline, and being afraid to say no to children was the best way to turn even a kid like me into a psycho or a spoiled person who wasted their life on cheap thrills. And yet, this threat was mostly empty. She was tough on me, but also fair. I wouldn't be punished that much. But I shouldn't make a habit of crying to get my way, since I was almost a teen, you know. I was nine after all. It was time for me to be more responsible.

AMBROSIA

Nine years ago, after defeating Belial, we decided to settle down. Aqorm had apparently had a child that she hadn't told me about. I was peeved at first, but eventually I understood. I was pregant at the time, and I believed this to be the child of Aqorm and Elias. But gradually I worked out that the two of them were really close, but Elias was not very committed to child-rearing. It also helped that I noticed her tail growing in. This child had already learned to walk and talk, although she had a tendency to growl at people she didn't like. Sastra had blond hair like her mother, but has very intense eyes that make people deeply nervous to look at, since they recall all their sins. Since she can walk already, she has been drafted as flower girl. But isn't the flower girl supposed to be in a white dress, not black?

Michael and Lilith brought a child with her too. Apparently, Lilith was seeing several lovers, and Michael happened to get her pregnant The child was beautiful with luminous wings and long red hair, and she can already talk and crawl. “Miss Ambrosia,” Portia says, “can I feel your belly?” This was at a period where we were still having rehearsals for the big event, and so I had a few more days. I nodded. She reached out her hand and

rubbed my five-month belly. It tickled, but I waited as she felt where my unborn child was. “I love her,” she declared. Wait, how did she know my child was female?

NEVRAS

Michael gave me strict instructions not to tell Ambrosia that her pregnancy with Portia had actually been a reverse pregnancy, that Lilith had not in fact been the mother, but had been the “father,” explaining that by their nature, demons had mostly inactive organs, even though Lilith had confided that she was more alive than most. Ambrosia was not to know, at least until later, because Michael wasn't sure whether she'd accept such things. I don't know what Michael is talking about, Ambrosia accepted me. But perception is a big reason why people leave the churches and temples, they figure that because the priests have standards of conduct that God must also hate gays, transgender people, or generally people like them. The mission of the church is welcome and forgive the sinner, not pretend they have no sin. In any case, I believed honesty was the best policy, but I didn't happen to believe in confessing secrets to random people. As long as Ambrosia didn't ask, I wouldn't tell her. Even though I know she would accept it, this was Michael’s secret.

Although I was open and honest about my tendency to crossdress, I knew there was a time and place for it. During the wedding, I wasn't going to do this in front of all of these people. Ambrosia had few relatives, but we invited all of the members of our party, then their parents and cousins, and then all of my relatives and my parents invited nobles and politicians, who in turn invited many of their faithful constituents to vote them back into power. By the end of it, we had about 144k people, but it paid for itself because, you know, nobles. They each wanted to compete with each other to show off their wealth. With the massive amounts of money they had, they agreed to build a sizable temple in which to conduct the service. Running out of horizontal space, they wound up making balconies so as many people as possible could see, and did some tricks with acoustics so everyone could hear. Needless to say, not all of these people would take it well if I did something out of the ordinary. Ambrosia promised that we would switch outfits for the reception (and wedding night), which was inviting mainly our close friends. For this reason, both the tuxedo and wedding gown were designed to stretch and shape to our bodies in a flattering way, and so it was that despite being noticeably pregnant, nobody among the visitors would be able to figure that out. Her dress was a floor-length strapless white dress with black flowers, with a internal zip-up corset just above her belly and lace flaring out to mask that section. The gown's train could be unhooked to reveal a mini dress, which could be zipped tighter, but right now, this was doing its job of making her look virginal. We didn't mind omitting some details to this huge crowd, it was our friends we would tell. The reception was for our friends. My tuxedo was a plain black coat and pants with white tie and shirt, so between my outfit and her dress, it looked vaguely like a zebra marrying a penguin. But outfits were pretty stylish, so it wasn’t that strange.

We let our groomsman and bridesmaids wear whatever they wanted, rather than insisting on expensive outfits and ugly coral dresses. Ambrosia had bad moments, but didn't feel like being a bitchy controlling woman for her special day. Zoe wore a green taffeta dress with layers of white chiffon underneath, something that was impossibly poofy and lightweight despite having about 50 yards of material. I had also decided to make Zoe my maid-of-honor since we usually were pretty close, so this prohibitively expensive gown got paid for. Azrael's dress was an altered miko gown with white top part and red below, but with more frills and such to make it into a bridesmaid's dress. Elias apparently had liked the outfit that he'd seen in Qurac temple for men, so yeah the whole turban, white tunic, blue robe with fringes and tassels, and many-colored jacket with jeweled breastplate. Aqorm was dressed in traditional elven garb, which was terribly strange to our eyes. She wore clothing of woven-together leaves and flowers, and hers was green like Zoe's dress (except the flowers gave some blue, yellow, and purple tones in spots) but unlike that dress, it made much more of a statement. Rather than shelling out a fortune, this dress probably hadn't cost a cent, as she gathered the flowers and leaves and stuck them together, and Elias helped to Preserve the leaves and flowers. Michael just wore a white toga, and he held Portia the entire time. Sastra scampered about on all fours like a wild kid after she did her job as flower girl, since neither Aqorm

nor Lilith believed children should have any boundaries. Yazim Jianne just wore his regular sorcerer's robes, which were apparently formal enough, he said. Selqui stayed near the boat, because she needed water frequently and the service would be too long, and besides which she didn't really understand the concept of formal clothing. And Lilith wore a black dress with lace midriff and slit sides, it was formal, if you confused formal for "suitable for attending a dance at a night club." I'm not sure how people in the temple felt about it, but she was kinda in good company. Our friends are freaks, but well they're our freaks. I realized that with all of these different outfits, we probably needn't have bothered trying to conceal stuff about ourselves. I couldn't exactly change, but Ambrosia pulled off her train halfway through the service and exposed her mini-dress and her baby belly. The audience gasped in shock. Then they looked at the rest of us, and shrugged.

But before that came the wedding ceremony. The service opened to *Come Ye Thankful People Come* and ended with *Jerusalem My Happy Home* which was sung by the absolutely huge congregation. When it came time to hand off the bride, Ambrosia's mother had died already, as had her adopted family. I was worried that she would feel alone, when suddenly the room filled with an awesome presence, and I saw the rough form of God by her side and behind her Manna's spirit stood with pride for her daughter. Ambrosia looked over, smiled, and stepped forward towards me. We invited Jesus as our priest. Jesus appeared as a black-haired woman with curly hair wearing a similarly black and white clerical outfit. Basically, it was a long shapeless robe, which was black with a stripe of white moving up the midsection and fanning out, forming what looked like an upside-down peace sign without a circle (Elias later explained that this symbol represented life and victory and was known as a Tree of Life sigil, and the so-called "peace sign" was actually a death rune). When Jesus stretched her arms out, the lines formed a cross. Inside these lines were black crosses, and where all lines met was a small Yin Yang with a golden *chi ro* symbol in the center and alpha on the left and an omega on the right. If it was possible to have pimped-out priest's robe, we definitely didn't spare expense on making Jesus look nice either. Ambrosia explained that Jesus deserved it, because he/she was family after all. I had no idea what she meant by this.

Normally, a priest will talk about earthly marriage, from passages like Genesis 2:24-28 for the Old Testament, then 1 Corinthians 13 about love, and then usually Matthew 19:4-6 talking about marriage. But Jesus wasn't really one to dwell on what other people did. Instead, she talked about God, pointing out how Jeremiah 3:1-14 talked about how humans were married to God, and finally Mark 2:18-20 in which Jesus compared the disciples to attendants of a bridegroom. Before he asked our vows, he delivered a powerful sermon about how these guests were the symbolic Bride of God, and one must see marriage as almost an extension of being joined again to God. Jesus spoke of his role as Messiah, and how all had atonement of their sins, not just those who said they were Christians. Jesus also revealed that God had provided this ceremony, by convincing these lords and ladies that hosting a public event was in their best interests. Jesus talked in depth about many religions and explained that he had "other sheep which were not of this fold" and his goal was to redeem as many people as possible. Jesus explained that religion meant to "re-connect" and that marriage was in fact the summation of everything written in legitimate scriptures. It was powerful and moving, but I was kinda shocked at the idea of loving Ambrosia to the point of worship. That was a tall order. How could I see Ambrosia as if she were God?

Weirder still, the vows we were asked were not the standard ones. Rather, he asked us, "Do you, Nevras Fitzembor, take this woman, Ambrosia Brahman to be your lawfully wedded wife, in good and bad times, for all of eternity?" That was bit more hardcore than I was used to. We agreed though. I loved that woman with all of my heart, and if the two of us lived in eternity, I wouldn't mind in the least.

I did my best in the days to come, though. I said my vows and she said hers. We tried to have fun together, so my family offered us a honeymoon in Heaven. I refused to see other women. I made sure to look after the family with part-time jobs, yet make time to be around my wife. We had no more children after the first, but I made sure she felt loved, and did whatever she wanted with me. And when Tamashii was born, we did our best to make sure she was loved and cared for. She learned to walk and talk with us

watching her, and we tried to get her to have friends. Our family friends acted as her friends, and she grew to admire adults more than children. And yet, since I wanted her to have peers, we started inviting Portia and Sastra to birthday parties and other events. Ambrosia and I wanted the best for our daughter. As she grew older, she didn't ask why she didn't have other friends. She had seen the treatment she had gotten in Opening. We did our best to make sure that she knew she was loved, despite all that had happened to her And I did my best to make sure that Ambrosia knew that she was dearest to me.

AMBROSIA

And so it was, that through the next few years we did our best to keep this vow. Even though Nevras could get on my nerves, I knew there was more to life than stupid pet peeves about who didn't do the dishes or who put up the toilet seat so they could pee standing up (It's fun! Why should I care that I usually miss? I feel manly doing it), because this was our marriage, and part of being a mature adult meant honoring commitments. Plus, we had such a cute child that neither of us dared leave. We protected her from that nice puffer sushi by eating all of it ourselves. Or any other type of sushi, after all, raw fish could be bad for you. And if she got bit by snakes or spiders, we made sure to suck out the poison (we sometimes forgot about the spitting out part so she started to call us dummies for our effort, but this was okay because she was safe). We kept hoping she would meet a nice boy, but it seemed like all she could manage was girlfriends, so I tried to keep her having a good childhood.

CHAPTER 7

In which Tamashii has a play date with her friends.

TAMASHII

I remembered ages ago when first met Portia and Sastra. It was when I lived in Opening, just before I moved to the small homestead (I guess I could call it) near Phoenix. I was being bullied, as usual, for being a strange kid with creepy powers I couldn't control. Sastra was in the general area with her mother, and noticed that I had stopped getting picked on by little kids, and was started to get the torch and pitchfork treatment from grown adults. I couldn't really hide my powers then, so I was an easy target. I have no idea how Portia knew about my suffering, but she kinda teleported on the scene too. She always seemed to be there when I needed her.

Anyway, after seeing a Seraphim and a half-demon arrive on the scene, this lynch mob quickly backed down. I spent the rest of the day with these two, just having fun and trying to forget about my stress. Aqorm gave them permission to spend time with me, and Portia said she would ask her parents for permission later and they would probably say yes. Sure enough, we became friends as we conducted our serious business of goofy pranks, exploring, and just generally having fun together. And when we moved to Phoenix, my friends agreed to visit me there, despite Aqorm living in the Ghobli area and Portia hailing from Heaven. Portia could just teleport over. Sastra was quarter-aquatic elf, quarter-wood elf, and half-demon, so she could just swim over with some effort. I still thought it was insane, since she could make it by boat. But these were my friends. Later, Yazim Jianne, a friend of my mom's, decided to construct a dimensional anchor using the stone steps outside my house, so a part of the walkway glowed blue during the day, and formed a portal that someone with the Return spell could use. He even made another one at Aqorm's house! This, combined with the homemade necklace that he made, greatly increased the frequency and duration of visits, since it was no longer a day trip, but a visit that could happen instantly. Sastra wore the necklace at all times.

SASTRA

Hey. So, Tamashii told all about the past, but she kinda never got to mention today. While it's fun to think of nostalgia and stuff, we kinda all were having a fun date, just the three of us girls. If it seems like we're too young to be thinking about boys and dating, well, we're hardly normal girls. I have a healthy demon's sex drive, meaning I'm already thinking about boys and girls, probably anything that moves, and some stuff that doesn't.

Tamashii was intellectually in her teens but in terms of emotional development not quite ready for boys, but she was starting to become interested in clothing and makeup where before she had her nose in a book. Portia was born knowing about her body and being conscious of it as she discovered how to change her form, and angels tend to develop sexually then spiritually, becoming more like feelings and unfixed energy as they grew in years. And yet, all of us are too young to have serious relationships, because we're still about nine or ten. Hence the idea of a play date.

Things had changed around towns in the last nine years. You see, since people could now permanently enchant things and alchemy had become easier to use (what with Synthesis also becoming more lasting and effective), to say nothing of the rediscovery of underground technology, in a very short amount of time, the face of cities and towns changed entirely. In many cases such as Zuran, Ghobli, or Aquamundo, this meant incorporating new farming tech and new building materials for increased durability of buildings. In other towns, like Opening and Gruumi, the towns were mostly unchanged, but they began to have streetlights and other small adjustments. Still others like Goji and Hinata, chose to remain unchanged, because their character as a town was at stake, or tourism would be affected, or some other reason. And lastly, were the cities and towns that decided to use Blueprints to remake the entire town. Phoenix was one such town, with King Charis and Queen Victoria sheltering everyone in town while the alchemists literally rebuilt the entire town to their imagination in one night. It was amazing, there were buildings that touched the sky, there were town parks and nature trails cutting through the original terrain, and there were natural hot springs dug up. The small mountain town was now a resort! But despite all these grand developments, they avoided urban sprawl and kept their town divided into neat districts where people could get what they needed. They kept their town quaint, despite being the latest stuff.

We'd gone to a nearby malt shop to drink banana milk shakes and eat massive amounts of cherry pie and coconut cake. I could eat more than her on account of my half-demon body and never would gain weight, so I scarfed down most of the dessert. I was her friend and always had her back, so I couldn't let my cute friend become a fatty. These sacrifices must be made for the greater good. You know how it is.

After this, we visited the shops. I stood guard outside to make sure no creeps laid a hand on Tamashii. I'd been protecting her from thugs since childhood, and I imagine when she started dating I would be her wing-woman. Portia on the other hand went in to the dressing room and helped her change, and Tamashii showcased all kinds of outfits. Every now and then, we'd stop and I'd try on stuff. What? Just because I'm a tough girl doesn't mean I don't enjoy clothing too. Portia had to be excused to the restroom.

Minutes passed. Hmmm, I might want to go check on Portia, to make sure there's been no accidents and she's not having her period or something. I don't have to worry about that, but if she was developing early, that might be a possibility.

PORTIA

To answer Tamashii's earlier question, I knew she was in trouble because I had been watching her. I was always watching her. Yes, I know it seems like a creepy stalker thing, but the fact of the matter is when I was a child, I touched Ambrosia's belly. I noticed a kindred spirit in this unborn child, and I started watching her from before she was born up to the present. That our families were close meant I would meet her eventually anyway, but as she caught my interest, I began watching her with clairvoyance. I saw as she was bullied time after time. I watched with pity, then concern, and finally longing to see her and to cheer her up. But until that day, I couldn't think of a sensible pretext to be there. If a half-demon was there, however, I could claim it had been a misunderstanding. If I was asked why I was there, I could claim that I assumed this girl might attack her. I'd watched Sastra too, enough to know she wouldn't actually do that. I had told Tamashii that I'd asked my parents if I could visit her, but I hadn't actually gotten anyone's permission. Michael's stance on child-raising is that you could do anything you wanted just as long as you stayed in touch, and took responsibility for your decisions.

I had asked to be excused at one point during the play date. Just before then, as we were hanging out and shopping, and generally having fun, I needed some quiet time to

take care of... some things. You see, Tamashii was starting to make me hot and bothered. And right now, when I thought about her, I touched myself.

I reached well inside until I touched *that*, and my pelvic muscles trembled in response. I was in a heap on the floor for a bit. “Are you alright in there?” Sastra called out, after I had obviously been gone awhile. I mumbled an affirmation, and cleaned myself up before heading outside.

Let's clarify something here. As a creature of Heaven, I did not think of random people when I masturbate. Sex must be an outpouring of love for the one I already admire, not as many believe, love as a means to an end for sex. Love is about faithfulness. That is, I had eyes for Tamashii because I admired who she was. I couldn't stop thinking about her, having grown up with her, and become a dear friend of hers.

We enjoyed the rest of the day, watched a movie on the Crystal Mirror called *The Beauty Inside* (the 2015 one), a story about a guy who changed forms from day to day. We went to a restaurant for some dinner with her before all of us went home to sleep.

I couldn't stop thinking about her all night. Tomorrow, Tamashii was going with her mother back on the quest, and there would be danger and I might not see her again for awhile, if ever. Given the danger of her quest, she might even die! I wanted to be with her always, and I vowed I would marry that girl one day. But I knew she wouldn't accept marrying another woman. If only... but nah.

ASMODEUS

Belial was weak. To have been defeated in such a way was a great disgrace to the likes of those who would call themselves demons. And Satan was not much better. Before the New Earth, Satan had been content to tempt a few billion humans, in order to perform his true role as an accusing angel. Yes, I knew all about God's sick plan to teach humans about good and evil**:** Allow Satan to tempt humans into gaining knowledge of good and evil, send Satan to accuse them of evil, so that they would know about suffering and in turn desire things like Grace or spiritual development or improvement of conditions on Earth, set up moral law yet make perfection impossible, and make human lives short so they find a sense of purpose. All of this was part of God's plan to bring entertainment to humans (and himself, presumably) and to help them grow through suffering. Now, Satan wouldn't even do his job, as humans were now immune to his powers, through widespread knowledge of the Tao. It was time that demons acted like proper demons. It was time for conquest.

Granted, I could probably have carried out my plans much earlier, but I had a feeling that other demons like Belial, Lilith, or Amy the Tainted would try to stop me. But since the last one had gone on a vacation to the tropics, Belial had been done away with, and Lilith had apparently become a chef the last I heard, the time was finally ripe. Normally, the Council would also try to stop this sort of thing, but with the addition of Jesus, the Council's official stance was to “promote national identities and to apply principles of non-intervention” as they put it. In other words, each town was now allowed to fully make its own decisions, so long as it did not interfere with others. All I had to do was make it look like the towns had chosen to be conquered by demons, and they would not interfere. At least, not until it was too late, and I had taken most of the continents over. By that point, our demons would conquer them too. It was time to put an end to such silly organizations, and restore true power to the towns. It was time to form empires again. If I had my way, the flag of Hell would fly everywhere.

Of course, my plan was not going to be easy. It had seven major steps and most of them, besides maybe the first, must be repeated in each town without anyone figuring out in time, or comparing notes with the previously conquered towns.

The first step was to make Hell a tourist destination. This had been managed without any action from me. As God remade the world over the last nine years, for some reason he had made this world overly safe. In short, it was not the sort of place that a being who existed since before anything should have made, but more like something that a housewife with a child would want for the Earth. I had little time to wonder about it, though, as I was busy carrying out stage two of my plan. Because of this unprecedented

peace and prosperity, humans and other races actually began to flock to Hell in droves for the experience of suffering. As I say, thank you God, for helping me with my plans.

Since it was now a tourist town, I next sent letters to the Council and even to unaligned towns begging and pleading to allow immigration. We would claim we were being overcrowded, and then declare that work and resources were scarce. Normally, even a tourist town like Hinata had some measure of security, usually involving checking identification, and asking for fingerprints or at minimum a thumbprint. With the activity of runes, these prints could be used to track any immigrants who had committed crimes within town, and bounty hunters took care of those who skipped town. But emergency refugees were often given a pass. All sorts of reasons wound up being used such as lecturing people about mercy and decency, how it wasn't right to fingerprint refugees like common criminals (even though every other citizen did this), or my favorite tactic was claiming not every demon had identification and asking them to carry it would keep them from participating in stuff like voting. These bleeding hearts made my task very easy.

I couldn't always be guaranteed cooperation on the acceptance of refugees without any screening though, so I found it helpful to grease the wheels a bit. Which meant of course, massive amounts of bribery. Hell uses Lucre rather than Gold, which is made from dried blood, sweat, and tears and a small amount of sulfur. It is the only currency at this time that is at risk of falling apart when exposed to water, and probably would do so but for blood having a significant amount of iron in it. What is less known, except by the tax offices, is that something about its creation gives it a bizarre property, that of also being an addictive currency. Holding more than perhaps a thousand or so Lucre tends to alter the mind of mortal races, causing them to say or do *anything* in order to earn more of it. The governors and mayors and other leaders would usually accept the terms of this Lucre. Others (like Hinata) had no intention of taking our money but were softhearted enough to let us in, just because we seemed pathetic. They would invite us to stay without the normal immigration channels and the money would not only buy their silence about this exchange, but some of the upper-class citizens they also would support us as it was passed around. “Not all demons do acts of terror,” they would say, “stop being so daemonophobic!” Likewise, any acts of sex such as mass orgies, rape, and depraved fetishes would be announced as just part of our culture.

After that, the tougher sell of changing the minds of regular citizens came next. Money of the sort we offered typically didn't trickle down, since the public currency of these state was still Gold, so we needed another tactic besides bribery. We needed propaganda, and lots of it. The problem, of course, was that the art of constructing new television shows had been lost since a short time before 4000 AD. Instead of making new shows, we had to basically hack old ones, editing the name and footage while retaining the episodes. Such tampered crystals turned black, but people welcomed the addition of “new” series. And so, *Friends* became *Fiends*, *Everybody Loves Raymond* became *Everybody Loves Demon*, and *Grace under Fire* became *Grace on Fire*. They could not replace any lines or major actions, it was a simple swap or one character for a demon in the story. And yet, even though absolutely nothing had changed about the story, those watching saw demons as just normal people like the rest of us, despite the fact that normal people didn't breathe fire or throw darkness around. The citizens of each town began to sympathize with out plight and if one of us was arrested, people would refuse to behave during sporting events. If we killed people, they would sob about the persecution that we had to face. We even publicly called our allies hypocrites, and they still did it!

The next step required some creativity. Since demons had unclear gender, I proposed to other demons that we should make a push to demand custom bathrooms to meet our needs. But before that, we had to undo several millennia of unisex bathrooms and the all of the drama they had solved. We again bribed city planners, this time to make public restrooms within cities, and to declare private toilets as a mark of privilege. And so, such private toilets were taxed until those that had them typically gave them up. The remaining restrooms were divided by gender, and we were quick to protest by pointing out that many demons had both tails and female sexual anatomy, so they needed special bathrooms that suited their needs.

Of course, part of the plan here was to manufacture an artificial crisis, so the first thing we did was tell city leaders privately that our special needs required open bathrooms with trough-style toilet, and then publicly declare that these bathrooms were proof of our second-class treatment. Likewise, we campaigned for a number of other rights and privileges, only to later declare them proof that the people of these countries were oppressing us. In fact, we sometimes disguised our own and had them call themselves Demon Exclusionary Radical People (DERPs for short), and such demons would act in a bigoted manner, forbidding demons from entering certain spaces. This in turn would discredit any remaining citizens who had misgivings of the sizable amount of demons who entered each town and bred with the males and females.

Finally, when a significant enough amount of demons were supposedly being given "second-class treatment" during false events, demons would begin openly attacking the citizens. We would take their houses and their crops, leaving them as homeless who sowed crops but were unable to harvest. Whenever anyone asked about this, they would be able to claim that they were acting in "self-defense" in response to hostility and oppression. In this way, demons would remake human towns as demon majority bases for new invasions. It was only a matter of time before other races were the majority, and our people would spread like a plague over the land. By that point, this world would be ours for the taking! It was time to occupy cities, in the name of all demons.

CHAPTER 8

In which the Buddha is seen on the road, and yet not killed

AMBROSIA

We left town and wandered on along the path to our quest. Walking didn't really seem logical now that we had all sorts of fast travel, but I needed to scout around on foot because many of the others had separated from our group. Michael was probably in Heaven, but we had no idea where Azrael and Zoe were. We'd checked Goji at one point, and we'd checked the Aiken Monastery so we figured maybe they were touring the lands on vacation. In which case, we'd probably find them much more effectively if we wandered aimlessly. Of course, Elias would probably disagree, and have some kind of system for finding them. But who cares what he thinks, let's just search randomly!

I also wanted to stretch my legs. We had been traveling by boat for quite a while, and sitting on Bahamut was no fun. Between her scaly skin and being unable to move while she searched meant I was likely to have cramped muscles.

The path winded around a small hill covered with grass. It was a windy road that obviously hadn't gone through any city planners but rather developed based on where people tended to walk. And it showed. The path was as smooth and bare as if someone had taken a plow to it, but so curved that this was impossible. Outside the path though, wildflowers, moss, and some small shrubs were growing. A man walked along the road towards us. Well, he was sort of a man. He had long hair and no beard, and no muscles or body hair. He wore a simple robe and his hand beads wrapped around it. He was chanting sutras and holding a shakujo staff like Elias had. He was so obviously a Buddha archetype even I knew, although the lack of shaved head kinda threw me.

NEVRAS

I guess I'll try explaining. In the old days, Buddhist monks and nuns shaved their heads every two months or when hair had grown "to a length of two finger-breadths" to remind of the original Buddha's renunciation of the world, to reinforce vows of celibacy, to let go of attachment, and to a lesser amount to distinguish from the ascetics that the Buddha had studied with before founding Buddhism.

However, the Miroku (or New Buddha) came and taught pure dharma. He taught that the idea of seeking enlightenment and renouncing all pleasure of the world were in fact vain, because living things become attached to even the idea that we are giving up something. That is, something like cutting hair is a physical action, a crutch to prevent one from realizing that only by ignoring the appearance entirely can one achieve true mastery of the spirit. In order to truly renounce the world, he said, one must renounce

even the attachment to renunciation. Miroku Buddhists began to marry, have jobs, and even have children. The difference between them and the rest of the world, is that their jobs tended to be those that they could do anywhere, their marriages tended to be open-ended where the husband was more of a traveling partner to the wife and child than anything else. They were sorta like the religious version of gypsies.

Since the average Miroku Buddhist had very unkempt hair, long beards, and dirt from their travels but this one had perfectly managed hair which did not seem to be combed but rather fell naturally, no body hair, and not a spot of dirt, I could safely guess that this was not a follower but Miroku himself. My guess seemed to be verified when as he came closer to us, he appeared at once to grow in our minds until he was fifty feet tall. The old saying went, “If you see the Buddha on the road, kill him” despite Buddhists being staunch pacifists, referring to this same letting go of attachment to objects of worship. And yet, we couldn't kill this guy. No, not because of pacifism, as we had killed over a thousand creatures in our travels, most of which are not recorded in this text. We probably couldn't kill this guy because when I looked again, his lower body appeared to be covered in clouds, and we were no longer standing in a meadow path but in a sacred space in the sky. He was simply too big and too invulnerable to possibly defeat.

He spoke to us. “You, mortal,” he said, pointing to Ambrosia, “do you desire happiness?” I shuddered, knowing she hadn't the benefit of Elias's years of study, or a royal academy education. She had been taught at some school, but no way would she know what not to say. I groaned as I heard her answer, “Of course! Who wouldn't want happiness?” Unfortunately, even to Miroku Buddhism, happiness to a Buddhist meant the removal of all desires and attachments. It also meant the extinction of all form and memories. In other words, Ambrosia loosely asked him, “kill me now.” Although his method was a nonviolent, a simple erasure from existence, the effect would have been startling to any third party. One minute we were there, and the next, we weren't.

We were reset to the few moments just before we met Miroku on the road. All of our memories were erased from this Reset, so Ambrosia couldn't exactly do something different. Rather, we would have would have repeat infinitely, except for the fact that I had a journal nearby, which I managed to write a few words before everything about me was voided. As I had written down, «Today, we met the Miroku Buddha on the road. He asked as whether we wanted happiness and Ambrosia said yes. We all...» a little at a time, it finally dawned on me after about 108 tries that I needed to do something about Ambrosia's big mouth. So I kinda knocked her out. The Buddha helped heal her, and she made the same stupid comment, and I had to adjust to this while we were stuck in another cycle. Finally, I latched onto the idea of covering her mouth, and yelling, “No! No, we don't want any happiness! We want to stay unhappy! We want to continue living, do our quest, and be with our friends! Even if it makes us miserable.” At this, the Miroku sighed and shook his head. “What strange humans!” he remarked. We found ourselves in a different spot than before. In fact, we were in the middle of a desert looking at Zoe and Azrael face to face.

CHAPTER 9

In which the Crests are unlocked in rapid succession

ZOE

Huh. I didn't see any signs of teleportation. They just kinda showed up in front of us. I guess this must be some kind of new trick the group had learned.

Azrael and I had decided to tour the world lately. Having lived together for quite some time, we had fallen into the same old dull routine. But then, I saw this ad in the paper. «See the world! Follow me, and the two of us will unlock the secrets of the universe together, traveling from the farthest reaches of the globe in search of cosmic truth!» It sounded romantic. It sounded exciting. And above all, it sounded like something Azrael would write, down to the references to the secrets of the universe and cosmic truth, and the knowledge known only to sea captains that the New Earth had

recently become a globe when before it was flat. But nah, it couldn't be her. Azrael was a stick in the mud. So I took out my own ad in the paper, and wrote back.

I arrived at the meeting place, and I knew my partner immediately. It was her. I could tell by the shape of her body, and the curve of her face. “Azrael!” I called out to my own lovely lady. I had never known that she wanted to escape, so bogged down were we with our mundane lives. And she definitely liked making love at midnight, as I found out.

We explored the upper continents first, traveling by foot and by rowboat. It was all so fun seeing new sights every day, but this was a fairly leisurely pace that we were only just now drawing to a close in our travels nearly two years later. All of the oceans, mountains, jungles, and swamps that we had seen, and all of the towns we had visited were part of this great adventure. Now all of a sudden we were wandering in the middle of a desert and our companions suddenly appeared. I decided it must be a mirage, and I walked right through. I know that those voices shouting at me to stop stepping on them were also a mirage. As was being beaten over the head by Ambrosia's fishing pole.

“Oh, you're actually real,” I said, after helping to heal the group. Peeved Ambrosia was peeved. She said, “Yes, of course I'm real. More real than you...” I didn't quite catch that last bit, but decided to let it go. As we were kinda in the middle of the desert, the next few hours were spent getting back to civilization. Apparently, Ambrosia already had the Alexander and Apollo Crests, and it looked like Lilith's too, so the temple near Goji was probably next. It was nice to see the gang again!

AMBROSIA

Apparently, they had just finished exploring Qurac, because the desert we were in was fairly out of the way. The town itself had a domed garden thingy that was fairly new, but we didn’t think to pick up any goods while in town. So instead we wound up having to forage for food and water, since that Buddha sent us far away from our own gear. I knew enough about cactus to avoid the obvious poisonous ones, but some of the stuff that I drank made me see elephant-sized caterpillars and glowing colors, so I probably wasn't quite as good at survival as I thought. The dust and sand bruised my flesh and tore my clothing, or would have if it hadn't been a gift from God so long ago. The others weren't looking so good. The cactus juice was (for the most part) sweet and refreshing, but we were all tired of drinking it. We were possibly also tired of hallucinating.

Somehow or other, we made it to town. While many of the towns had commercialized and/or industrialized, Goji stayed traditional. Goji's philosophy was that each town has a spirit, and its own had built a tourist industry on exorcism, so they liked the old world charm of their town. Besides, it was rumored that ghosts could actually interfere with the more modern Glow Orbs, and cause all kinds of flickering lights. Goji had not changed at all in the nine years since our other quest. We rested and ate, since we had nothing for days but cactus. Goji's food was coastal cuisine with large amounts of fish and eel and seaweed in their diet, since Goji, while surrounded on all sides by desert, was nonetheless only a few miles from the water. Better yet, they had long ago discovered and exploited underground reservoirs, so while most of the nearby area was barren, Goji itself was capable of rice, wheat, soy, and leek cultivation. And because their town was modeled after traditional Asian aesthetic, Goji favored food such as sushi and sashimi. Since they had no livestock, beef and pork had to be imported, and chickens were considered nuisance creatures. They had a number of fish stews, and a dish called carimpeel which was basically the turducken of seafood (giant peeled shrimp stuffed inside an eel stuffed inside a deboned carp), but honestly, their specialty was olgoi khorkoi. These worms were found everywhere that had soft soil or sand, but the majority of the New Earth was not desperate enough to eat it. Living near the desert as they had, Goji had created an art form of catching the giant worms, and keeping them in porous cages where they were made to throw up any soil they had consumed, and then fed nothing but grains and vegetables. The result was a taste very much like snail, but its sheer size meant that a single worm could be cut into huge strips and broiled or sauteed, with a yellowish meat. Last night, they apparently caught a big one too, so while we drank some water and rested at the inn, we enjoyed a four course meal. There was *natto* and pickled vegetables, *sashimi* and grilled eel on a plate of rice, a khorkoi rolled and stuffed with leek and rice

with tofu, and they had some fish-shaped pastry stuffed with some sort of sweet filling. They called it *taiyaki*. It seemed so odd for it not to taste at all like fish.

We headed east in order to meet with the Oracle of the Four Gods, but it turned out to be anticlimactic. No sooner did we reach this spot from the desert exhausted and thirsty from our journey than we noticed Kodama standing outside the large building. She looked peeved. And the building itself looked like someone had smashed it with some sort of strange weapon. Fist-sized indentations surrounded by large shockwaves riddled the building, and the entrance had apparently collapsed. Noticing us, she blushed, "Sorry. After my stronghold just got broken into by you guys last time, I got kinda upset and knocked the place around a bit. Hope you don't mind or anything." I gaped at the building, "A bit upset...? There are several cracks in the tower!" She nodded sheepishly, "Sorry... Here I'll make this lesson quick. It is the nature of all things to wear away. That tower would have developed those cracks without my help. That my freakish strength managed it in one day is beside the point." She gave me my Crest, and shooed me away before I could insist that in fact it was not besides the point. I kind of wondered where she would live now, but she was probably the type to sleep outside. It was all good, then.

Uhhhh, then we headed back to the village of Goji to board our ship. We were shocked to find that entering the town right now was more difficult than I thought. An army of Kochou awaited us. How would we escape?

In the face of such a huge army, I remembered my Console, that device I got from being God part-time. I rarely used it because on an average day I made my bed, did some farming, looked after Tamashii when Nevras was too busy with housework, caught fish, sold extra crops, and did my laundry sometimes. While I could use this power to suddenly make my house a mansion or something, or to make my farm incredibly productive, there didn't seem to be any point to such power. The only times I used it was to make money fall from the sky when we were short (okay, I used that one a few times, because I sucked at farming), to make it snow when Tamashii was feeling lonely or bored, to revive pet goldfish, and whenever I decided to act as God because a meteor was going to hit the Earth and wipe out humanity or something along those lines.

The thing is, I discovered a side-effect. The more I used it, the more that I was erased from my own life. That is to say, in the beginning of using it, I disappeared for a fraction of a second into the white room which I now know as the Debug Room. Everyone forgot about me (except Tamashii, who can't explain her own existence) while I was there.

When I first started using this, it only took away fractions of seconds, but the last time that I used it, it was an entire week where they forgot I existed. And before that, a whole day. It isn't that there is some sort of inherent problem with the Console, this is probably time spent resolving glitches. And the more I use it, the more these glitches stack. I guess I could compare it to telling a small lie, then having to make more and more lies to conceal the first. To resolve the fact that a goldfish died and I didn't want to tell her, the goldfish would now still be alive when I used it. But, having to revive it and extend its life well beyond the limits of what it can actually live creates more and more problems. And that's just a stupid fish. When I tried to avert a meteor, there were issues that their absence caused, such as excess kinetic energy and momentum that wasn't attached to anything, and so on. It was a mess. I had stopped making money since it did create inflation and instead worked harder at farming, I had stopped trying to force snow or raise pets and simply tried to be around my family more, and in general only used the Console for an emergency. You know, like a credit card only used for emergencies.

And this was an emergency. But... I thought of my family without a mother, and realized the only proper way to use this was correctly, and that would involve fully becoming God. I suspect, if I were really honest with myself, it wasn't actually glitches that lengthened my stay here. It was *me*. If God were using this Console, everything that God used it for would probably be free of any serious glitches. But I used the Console to impose a reality that was different from the one I was willing to face. The more I tried to hide myself from things like death, suffering, and poverty, the more I effectively locked myself in a room away from other people. Such a thing was little more than a toy to me, since I couldn't use it properly. I was only human (when it was convenient).

I put it away, intending to give this stupid thing to God one day. To let God deal with the meteors or floods or whatever, not me. Even though technically I was God, God knew what he (ummm she) was doing. She would be able to use it without paradox. Again, an army of Kochou awaited us. How would we escape?

MARIPOSA

I had eventually come to the realization that in fact Ambrosia and her group were not in fact responsible for my problems. However, one way or another, we were losing land to the humans with their constant drive to have apartments in the middle of nowhere, and since that group kept showing up on places that we sought out, they kinda sorta still did manage to annoy me. And frankly, I just needed someone to blame.

I brought with me a platoon of basic L troops and a row of P troops. Our armies were divided into five categories: L(arva), P(upa), M(ales), F(emales), and Q(ueen). Like humans, the Kochou had sexual dimorphism (I was abnormal, in that I changed my sex upon metamorphosis), but at the larval and pupal stages, it wasn't terribly great. Unlike actual butterflies, Kochou had a queen, but they weren't like bees, with a queen and her drones (with only her mating, I mean). Rather, the queen appeared much like a female except for being taller and more beautiful with antennae atop their head, and she had the ability to issue psychic commands to the other Kochou. Queens seldom appeared in battle, instead acting when complex strategy was required. I often wondered if in fact I was a queen, since I had a talent for leadership, but so far I had no antennae. I was getting headaches lately though...

Typically, the larvae were our basic infantry, while the pupae learned more specialized skills as ranged units or medics. My troops had a few infantry, but the pupae were rather new. Most of these were my older females, and they were promising fighters, so I had high hopes for them in the future. I would train them as my elite troops.

I had made a decision that because this village was on the coast of the ocean and was otherwise surrounded by desert, it must have become this way through mismanagement of resources. I was convinced that once we destroyed this town, the land around it would return to a lush forest. I had no proof of this notion, and any superiors that still had hopes of me obeying their commands repeatedly told me that this was incredibly stupid, but I was convinced. Once we took this land, our forests would massively increase, and we would be able to settle in this land and help the Sakuya regrow themselves here.

Apparently though, we weren't the only standing army in this area. A group of demons were also standing outside the gate, demanding asylum, and claiming that we were oppressing them! That was outrageous! We met them only moments ago, and already they were trying to exploit our presence.

ASMODEUS

As it turns out, corrupting regular citizens is far more difficult than that of state officials. All it takes to sway a leader of most countries is money. Bah, worthless paper, and people compromise their principles over it. Should this fail to have the desired effect, having a few thugs threaten them is usually all it takes to have them abandon their principles. But regular people? That is an art.

I saw these troops of Kochou were blocking the way into town, and I had an invasion army of my own, but since I had no desire to fight, I hatched a plan. Many of the townspeople had gathered outside because two groups of people camped outside the city was a curiosity, so I searched around for some scraps of wood and set them neatly in a pile. The wood apparently was from discarded crates for hauling soap, since the clean smell assaulted my nose. Demons liked filthy smells like rotting food, grime, and blood.

I climbed the makeshift podium and orated, channeling some of the worst speakers ever. While it may sound at odds with practical advice, the worse the speech, the more it sticks in the audience's head. I wanted to polarize the town between people who remembered my speech and hated me for it, and the poor saps that bought it. There are five tips for making a horrible speech: (1) start over the top, (2) forget authenticity and if possible get to sex and violence fast, (3) insult the audience's intelligence, (4) give the same speech to every audience or basically quote someone else, and above all (5) bribe the audience with some sort of gift after the speech. Keeping this in mind, I said,

“Townspeople! Townspeople! Look at me! Look at my beautiful demonic body.” I wasn't as attractive as demon females, but my appearance was nothing to sneeze at after all. They predictably rolled their eyes, but their attention was now on me so I continued, “As you know, we demons are often considered to be harbingers of destruction and sexual depravity...” I continued with in-depth description of orgies and violence perpetrated by the demon race. The audience groaned.

“However!” I interjected, “All of this is just a misunderstanding, honest! I think this is an opportunity to give voice to all those voiceless demons out there that couldn't be here today. There's been some distressing things to think about lately with all of the demonic invasions and new cities popping up, and all of us feel as though we're different. We think of ourselves as elves, dwarves, humans, demons, and all the rest but when I see you folks I see nothing but untapped potential. You've got potential! And you've got potential!” I pointed random people before continuing, “And more importantly, I see how all of us are at heart the same, and should be treated equally. No matter whether we are talking about racism or sexism, all of us are exactly the same and should be treated the same because our needs are the same. That's right, not only should demons be treated the same as humans, but men and women should be treated the same. Men should be wearing pads and be on the pill. And not only that! Humans should be living together underwater with merfolk! Too long has this oppression of humans gone on underwater.”

Before the humans understood that my speech implied that I drown all humans, which I actually intended once they let enough of us in, I kept on with more nonsense speech, “We are talking about dispelling this notion that one race, one nation, one species has the right to dominate or exploit another with impunity. For long, I have watched how cattle are treated. Fed with hormones and antibiotics, made to produce milk on demand, with their poor children stripped away from them. All of us need to allow cattle to be left alone. You see, many of us are egocentric, and we don't think of the poor feelings of these innocent beasts. We take the milk intended for the calf and put it in our coffee!” I glossed over the fact that with a totally vegan culture, there would be no dairy market and people would stop raising cattle for milk or meat. What would happen to cattle? Why they would be put down, of course! We'd stockpile the meat for ourselves, saving a small portion of cows by claiming we had a special carnivorous diet, while the humans got weaker and more malnourished. And if they really wanted meat, we'd sell it at inflationary rates, and demand they pay extra for the injustice of the murder of such beautiful creatures. But it was okay for *us* to perform the same injustice.

“And I think many of us are afraid of change because we think it means we have to sacrifice something,” that's because it *does* mean exactly that, as I was about to demonstrate, “which is why you need to utterly change your culture immediately, to allow total acceptance of demons into this country. We expect you to open your doors and indeed even give up your house for us. It is not fair or just that demons are treated like outsiders wherever they go. If we use love and compassion as the guide, we can build a better world. A world without sexism or racism, where housing is free to all demons, and where cows never have to suffer the indignity of being milked.”

All of this sounded like utopian crap on paper, but it was calculated to get the more intelligent listeners to feel like they were being treated like idiots, while the rest of the crowd ate it up. And to add to the divide, I asked who was with me. Everyone who agreed with the speech was rewarded with soul cakes, a sort of spice pastry, while the others were scolded for being racist and sexist and part of the problem.

Contrary to the view of jaded individuals, the average person is neither racist nor sexist, but for the most part decent. They work hard at their dreams, they love their friends and their families, and are okay with strangers within reason, after all wanting more friends. Yet I have no use for these things. To manipulate people, you first have to undermine these very relationships. You first work on people's ability to trust each other, by accusing people of being racist or sexist or some other evil. You work on them with their priests too, who can also be bribed or convinced they are doing the right thing (priests are not only greedy, but also idealists). You tell them that they should do more to welcome the stranger and care for the poor, and ironically it distances them from those who are fine just hanging out with their friends. Those who listen to such message get

sifted into those who harden their hearts, and those who get concerned about how they would look morally. You cut them off from their friends by fear of how they might be seen. When people are more concerned with their image than their loved ones, you've got them. The next step is to simply push the idea that accepting demons will enrich lands through tourism and cultural exchange.

Seeing that the audience had mostly become receptive to my speech, I decided to make a scapegoat for all of their tension. I pointed to the Kochou army over there, “Look at that huge army of bug people out there. Now, you may think they have merely come to defend their homeland, but actually they are here to pillage and destroy this fair city. And we are just poor refugees trying to make a home for ourselves, and to escape from their hostility. Now, won't you join us, in stopping this menace?”

Within the town, the commotion continued due to the protests, not just requesting but demanding more demon tourists. Other towns have them, they insisted, why can't we? Others fought those people, knowing what I was about. And then there were those who fought the Kochou. In the confusion, we managed to infiltrate the general population, bypassing the border gates and securing homes for ourselves that probably used to belong to other residents. And so it was that while outside there was an army, these useful idiots allowed outsiders be brought in, and Lilith's group managed to escape along into the crowd. We would deal with them later.

AMBROSIA

We took the ship, seeking to continue our quest. It was a long boat ride with a very grumpy captain. He had seen his home town get invaded by demons, and while it wasn't yet destroyed, he'd traveled a bit more than some of the “tolerant” rubes in town, and had seen the wreckage of those places. At least, that's what he told us when we asked why he looked so grumpy. For the most part, we hadn't seen many demons at this point, as we were distracted with our hanging out with friends, talking to Oracles, and staying out of towns for the most part except to exit a boat or enter one. And we could bypass towns entirely, on account that we had a dragon and stuff. But I was sure this might be a problem. So we made a note to investigate this later.

We arrived in Galaxia, and marched ourselves towards where Chronos was. He appeared to be getting “old” this time, as his aging was beginning to break down. Before, he had generally been able to cycle from old to young and back again, but this time, he appeared to be stuck at a young age and getting younger. I imagined in only a few days he'd manage to wipe himself out of existence. It was a good thing we made it in time!

Time is a funny thing. You seldom know how much you've got left. One day, you're young, and you think you've got all the time in the world to work on books or movies, or finish art projects. The next day, you might drop dead from eating fast food, and the thing you thought would get finished easily is now another thing taken away from you. If I had time like Aqorm, I'd probably waste so much of it, and before I blinked I'd have wasted it at least as fast as if I only had 80 years. It kind of made me think, looking at this Oracle who looked about to de-age himself to death, what was the best way to spend my own life? Should I try to meet people? Should I just concern myself with my friends and family? Should I focus on hobbies, or leaving something behind to remember me by? What really was the best way to use my time?

I decided for now, the best thing was simply to talk to this guy. “Hey there,” I said to Chronos, “you okay?” He looked at me blankly, “Have I met you before? Strange... I seems like there's something I should know.” Tamashii waved to him, “So, then, who am I?” A flicker of recognition showed in his face, even though he had never met her in his life. “Ah yes,” he said, “Tamashii! Who could forget such a cute smile? It's been so long!” I sighed, “Your stupid temporal magic made you forget me, didn't it?” It figured. He remembers Tamashii, not me, after all my adventures. Chronos faced me, “Then refresh my memory. Tell me about what I am going to talk about.” What an odd question.

I told him that he was gonna talk about time. It seemed a safe bet, after all. “At no point have I ever talked about time,” he said. I responded, “ Wait, how is that possible? You're the Oracle of Time!” My husband shook his head, “Don't sweat it dear, these Oracles just keep getting stranger and stranger.”

I mentioned dreams. He said, “At no point have I ever talked about dreams.” But last time... Tamashii saw my look of confusion, “Hey Mom, get with it, if it's already happened, it hasn't happened to him yet.”

Fair enough. Next, I tried mentioning goldfish. After all, this was probably something he had never talked about before... He agreed with me, “ At no point have I ever talked about goldfish.” I shrugged, “Tamashii, you ask him.”

And so, my little girl gave it her best shot. “You asked about... destiny,” she said, “Am I right?” Chronos nodded, “This is correct, I was going to mention Fate, and how it relates to Time. You see, all things are changes by time, they grow, age, die, and possibly are born again. Not even I am immune.” The atmosphere suddenly felt sad. Nevras asked, “Why does it sound like he's leaving us? I'm worried.” But I refused to accept this, “But how can someone who keeps aging and reversing ever die? Shouldn't it keep up?” After all, it seemed like a stable time loop. He shook his head, “Before I die, I wish to face you in battle.” This guy was already irritating me so I accepted.

Yazim Jianne cut in, “Wait everyone, I'll take care of things. You just fight.” Our mages tried various effects on him, but he seemed to cancel them out readily. Then they appeared behind us. “Hold up,” he said, and opened a small portal into the Realm of Void. I guess it still technically existed, even though it was no longer able to be visited. In any case, Yazim Jianne had gotten better with Silent Spells. After that display, much like that guy from *The Matrix* stopping bullets, the lot of us decided that ranged attacks were probably no good. So we charged at him with our weapons drawn, but suddenly found ourselves in our original position. We tried it again, and skipped back to start. It wasn't a reversal, so much as a feeling that our location had saved and was now being loaded to a previous one. Yazim Jianne had a solution, drawing what appeared to be a Star of David on his own arm before he sketched it on ours. Periodically, the symbol would glow faintly, showing attempts to revert our positions, but it made little difference.

Chronos changed his tactics, attempting to stop time. The symbol on our hands gave us a little protection, so we could see time as it stopped, but not move. I suppose it was a relief not to just have a gap in time, since it prevented us from being caught completely off guard when he moved or attacked, but it was also frightening watching him try to throw rocks or whatever at us. Thankfully, his brand of time freezing didn't allow things like momentum to function, so we had a brief window when time started again to dodge his attacks. Yazim Jianne finally arrived on a solution of transporting us to a parallel dimension. This meant that another us was sent to our dimension, he explained, and the same would be true on several other dimensions. Surely this wouldn't cause problems later on. In any case, because it wasn't stopping *our* time anymore, we were free to move in the frozen time. It was kinda cool walking around like this.

Chronos had a few other tricks though, as we advanced towards him. He opened portals to hot or cold dimensions, hoping to catch us in the blasts of air. He sent cosmic energy at us. He even tried to mess with our speed. Thankfully, Yazim Jianne knew his stuff about time/space magic. And so, he tried one last trick. Right as we were about to close in on him, he advanced our ages. Suddenly, my hair was kinda gray and I had all sorts of aches and pain. I was hunched over, about fifty pounds heavier (I needed to watch my diet from now on), and a lot more wrinkly. Nevras on the other hand, was kind of hot. He was still healthy, having a bit of salt-and-pepper hair that he'd apparently grown out, and his body was fit if a bit arthritic. “Hey you, ummm... Yaz-whatever-your-name-is,” I pointed to that guy, “Change us back!” He shook his head, “That spell? I forgot it long ago. But if he dies, it should be okay.” Aside from Aqorm (who would have aged but now was a real elf), Selqui, and Lilith, most of the rest of us were involved in the slowest battle of all time. We'd forgotten most of our spells, and we were hobbling toward him at a snail's pace. Finally, Lilith put everyone out of their misery by rushing up and beating the crap out of the Oracle, and the battle was over. Our bodies returned to normal, as Chronos coughed and “*All* cycles need to eventually be restarted, or else they fall apart eventually. The same wasn't true of a stable time loop like mine, but I knew you guys would hurt me too much... so time fell apart,” he explained, “Soon, a new Oracle of Time will be born. I have been alone for many years, but after I finish instructing you, I will have completed my task on Earth, and I will never have existed.”

Everyone cried, and then he wiped himself out of most of our memories, so we stopped mourning, wondering why our faces were so salty. I said, “Typical. He dies with a paradox too. How did he teach us if he didn't exist?” As my new Crest glowed, I told the others we needed to get a move on. We rushed back to our boat.

From Galaxia, we sailed our ship to Ghobli. We could have easily headed to the Divine Border next, or nearby Kirin to where Thanatos was at. And indeed these places were our destination. And the Aiken Master had told us that he insisted his Crest must be done last. But fuck that. He was closer, and I would be damned if I was traveling around the world just to fulfill some stupid sequence. So we sailed due northwest, narrowly avoiding crashing into Phoenix as we navigated toward our destination. We veered a bit to the west and headed to the island. Then we climbed up that tower again, which I desperately wished I had done when I was also there to get Lilith's and Alexander's Crest. In any case, I had to rest after climbing all those steps and my legs hurt. The residents of the Aiken monastery were annoyed with us, as we weren't permitted here but demanded we be let in. The Aiken monastery had history behind its decision to close its borders, have seen State control when the Plague was spread during open borders, only to force quarantines as a sort of house-arrest. They lost their jobs, their rights, and their freedoms. After this event, those who remembered built this place. It was safe to say that they deeply resented the idea of people barging in without any kind or screening, but these folk had already seen Lilith tear down the door earlier.

Anyway, I finished resting, and I approached the Aiken Master. “What are you doing here?” he asked, “Aren't you supposed to still be completing your quest?” I stood my ground, “I demand to be tested by your now!” I fully expected him to shoo me out of the place, and leave us to the people who we'd managed to piss off. Instead, he behaved as though it was exactly the right time to see him, “Now the final test. You will need to face yourself.” I asked, “What do you mean?” He barely explained as he took to battle with us, “I have taught you about Nature, Love, & Family. These things are Bonds. Now, I have decided to teach you about Boundaries.” He paused meaningfully, as though to emphasize that I'd basically ignored such boundaries when I barged into the town, regulations be damned, “Listen closely, if you will. In this world, people will take what they want from you. They will use excuses, like guilt, martyrdom, or outright convincing you that that you are evil for refusing. But you must always stand behind what you need in this world. For if not... terrible things will happen.” At this, I was curious, “What things?” He explained perfectly, “Terrible things.”

The battle started easily enough, but we quickly found that he had some sort of perfect shield against all attacks. Not even Hellfire could defeat him! As for us, his powers were overwhelming! He had some sort of technique that drained us of all of our energy, after which our healers desperately tried to keep us healthy. If that wasn't enough, he had a powerful attack that beat us half to death called the White Cloud Punch. We struggled mightily against him, but then Nevras said, “Hold up, hold up! Something's weird here...” Then I noticed it too. It was indeed very weird, but Nevras let me explain it.

I said, “I noticed two things while fighting. First, you defend yourself pretty completely. Your own life is important to you, right? Also, my life is off-limits, since none of your attacks could kill me. You're holding back so you don't hurt me, right?”

He nodded, “Very good. I concede the match.” After the battle came more mind games, “The purpose of your second quest is to defeat a great good, not an evil force as before. And so I ask you, what does that make you?” I smiled, “It makes me a villain. But I'm okay with that. When the righteous can't do what needs to be done, it's up to the likes of vigilantes and anti-heroes. It's okay.” He didn't object, and suddenly I had his Crest as well. We had to rest for some time though, as Elias had used Regeneration on us, and the constant healing and wounding had taken its toll on our bodies.

Back when the world was divided into the New Earth and the Realm of Void, it was possible to sail off the edge of the world, making travel to the other side of the world significantly more difficult. Now, however, the Earth was round. Probably.. Sailing west instead of east, we managed to make it to Kirin in a matter of days, when before it involved sailing east for weeks. From there, we made it to Isis Temple. The same creepy

interior greeted us, as we passed the cultists, and made our way to the Oracle. “No matter what, you must always face Death,” mentioned Thanatos.

This battle was a bit different with a different group, but this time was actually easier. Azrael sealed away his undead, no sweat, while Lilith and Selqui cut at his arms. Nevras and my daughter used their best moves to punch holes in his undead flesh, while the two of us with temporal powers basically held him in place before he could even attack, until he just declared defeat. Considering how hard the battle was before, he looked sad.

He sighed, “You have done well, and yet... The Chain of Harm continues. You have changed nothing.” I asked, “Is there any way to break the cycle? I don't want this pain to continue.” He explained, “Love can soothe the pain, but the origin is Free Will. To take that away, would be stripping them of what makes them human. If you were okay with that, you might as well be my servant. I know you mean well. But another has already chosen that path. You must find your own.” After some thought, I realized that he was talking about Estheriel. Was I really making such a bad decision?

We ditched our boat to head to Heaven directly. I didn't want to get bogged down with all this extra travel time, as this second journey was increasingly making me edgy. It seemed like all of the Oracles were telling me that there was something terribly wrong with this quest. But how could that be? I had received this quest directly from God, why would God steer me wrong? Well, there was the whole Yin and Yang thing, where God sometimes brought bad fortune. But still!

Apparently, Bahamut felt the same, because she said that she was having wing strain and parked us in the desert in the island just south of the Divine Border. Oh sure, she said that her wings hurt, but I knew. While she took on human form, she set a fire, and talked with us about our dreams after this was done. I could tell she was judging me. Still, I answered, “The three of us are probably gonna go back home and stuff.” Nevras raised an eyebrow. I suppose we should have more ambition after an ordeal like this, but honestly I just didn't feel like doing anything dramatic. After a long moment, he shrugged and nodded. “Not me!” said Tamashii, “I still haven't gotten adventure out of my system. Besides, Mom met Dad on her journey. I was hoping I could find a boy that I like somewhere along the way.” Zoe and Azrael just looked at each other and grinned. Elias said something about becoming a master librarian, and Aqorm and Lilith had largely found their place already. As for Yazim Jianne and Selqui, I didn't want to ask them, but they volunteered. “We plan to make a baby,” Selqui said. I was surprised, it was something so normal! But it turned out as they explained they meant actually *make* a baby. You know, like in a test tube. Finally, Bahamut spoke, “I've watched all of you while I traveled. I was originally just gonna take a long nap back in my cave, but I kind of want to live among humans for awhile.” We talked around the campfire a little longer, as we fished fresh eel from the nearby water. Unlike the people of Goji and the nearby area, we didn't really know how to prepare eel, so after having a tough bit of eel jerky, the rest got tossed into a stew. It was passable, I guess. In any case, we were ready to face the day after a night of desert camping. Bahamut flew us to the outside of God's tent and then flew away for now.

MICHAEL

Throughout the Bible, it mentions numerous times that God's relationship with humans is like a marriage, and it mentions numerous times about the unfaithfulness of God's chosen people, and how God basically acted like a spurned lover until getting used to this shit. Looking at it from this perspective, that the life of Jesus is not reported by most Jews suddenly makes sense, as it means God kinda told them they weren't special anymore. The sort of rejection always hurts, even if the real reason for it is to extend the gift from the few to the many. Human nature is somewhat envious, even of sharing the same thing. Think about all those celebrities who want to tax carbon but be exempt, and drive their Porsche everywhere they go. It’s fine for others to sacrifice, after all.

All these passages about unfaithful relationships... and suddenly I knew how it felt. I have become pregnant from that night in the pub, yet after that, Lilith treated me like a secret that had to be kept. And from viewing events in Heaven, I discovered that Lilith

had also given Aqorm a child. But while Lilith eventually came back to visit and support her, apparently I was the “mistress” and my pregnancy didn't matter to her.

After nine years away from her, I had gotten past the heartbreak of her rejection. After all, while she hadn't visited in all that time, I had gotten to bond with her daughter. I kinda forgave her, even though it still hurt. But I loved her, even if I wasn’t special.

Anyway, a great deal had changed in Heaven. Unlike the others, I remembered the time when Ambrosia made the Universe Egg, and she asked everyone what they wanted. I had said, “I wish to improve Earth so it is more like Heaven, and Heaven so it is even better.” Now, I knew I didn't expect much from that wish, but unlike the others which involved creating new species, it seemed like her lack of experience as God really showed with regard to good and evil. The physical state of the Earth didn't substantially change except to become more realistic. But the balance of good and evil kinda broke. For instance, not wanting people to be killed by random encounters, she moved all creatures inside dungeons. And the Earth was now round instead of flat and rotated, but this caused problems with periodic dizziness for people who got motion sick. To say nothing of the upside-down people in the southern hemisphere! And not wanting extreme weather, she took away all seasons and sudden storms or earthquakes. Rather than improving the Earth, she made it less desirable. It was safe for her child, but it was a bit too sheltered and sterile. I would have to talk to her when we met her next, and discuss some amendments to my original idea, especially since Heaven was now terrifically boring. Instead of the vast number of trippy plants and animals there wasn't much here anymore. I suppose I would get to tell them sooner than I thought. I heard their voices outside the tent. Ambrosia entered with the others, then as the others were distracted by the sights of the inside of the tent, she slipped outside.

As an archangel, I was more clued in to the nature of God than mortals were, so I understood. Before, God was a separate consciousness from Ambrosia, so she and God could talk to each other, and appear in the same room. However, now that she was God, she had to consciously split this part off or it would appear that she was doing a sort of puppet show. Typically, this meant that for most of the time, God couldn't be in the same room as her unless she somehow made it happen. And more importantly, she probably had to take a nap right now for God to show up.

I had noticed this not because it was common knowledge, but because when I returned to Heaven after Ambrosia claimed to have spoken to God, suddenly God was absent from his tent for most of the day, only present about eight hours. Since God was omnipresent, there was no reason for God to disappear, but since this was about the time that people would got to sleep in her area, I pretty quickly figured this out. I have no idea if the other archangels even knew. If they did, they never said anything in the last nine years.

In any case, the group came in like bad tourists and the little girl Tamashii talked to all these angels. I showed them around the tent which always looked more impressive inside than outside. Then suddenly God appeared, just as I heard snoring outside.

TAMASHII

“Grandpa~!” I shouted. I had entered the tent where God often dwells in Heaven. Well, when God isn't wandering the Earth, that is. Ambrosia had slipped outside to use the bathroom, and God only just now appeared, having been somewhere else before this. The back of the tent had a thick curtain, in the tradition of the ancient Temple, but all around inside the tent, the space was impossibly vast, as though we had stepped outside rather than entering a tent. The area in front of the curtain shimmered, and the Triune form of God phased through like a spirit. *Ah,* God said without using any quotations*, nice to meet you again! It has been a long while since last I we met.* God's still small voice echoed inside my head. While the others motioned to Michael to quietly exit the tent to go find Mom, I was to keep God distracted during all of this. But it was like God could see everything or something, because God barred all the windows and doors, so to speak.. *Not so fast*, God said, *Who told you that you could escape*? And so, they were held captive while I had a conversation with my grandfather on my mom's side.

Since I had my grandfather as God, and I finally got to see Him again, I decided to ask all sorts of questions that humans have when they encounter God in person. Plus I

was his grandchild who I had all sorts of questions about that too. But first I needed to ask one very important question. “God?” I asked. Answered he, *Yes*? I requested, “Could you, maybe, stop speaking that voice directly inside my mind? It's kind of hard to hear.” The giant floating triangle in the air nodded, and immediately shifted to a more human form. The transformation was impressive, as God kinda reconfigured atoms.

Sort of. God had no properly defined features so much as being a white silhouette against a whiter space, almost as though someone had painted a white background with layers of paint, then erased them around this area. Somehow I could see God just fine, but could not pick out any physical features, besides noting that God was naked, and yet somehow this form appeared familiar to me. Like, I had seen it almost every day of my life. Like God was... But that was not true, that was impossible.

The voice of this version of God was greatly changed from the still voice that I had heard before. It was an androgynous voice. It sounded like a female voice trying to sound deep, or a male voice that sounded slightly higher. I wasn't sure.

So, anyway, I asked my other questions. “Grandpa,” I asked, “I've heard that you send sun to shine on the evil and the good, and rain for the just and the unjust.” The silhouette nodded, “That is correct.” I continued, “I also heard that you brought the Law to the Jews as salvation, but the Christians say the Law is a curse. Can you help me make sense of this?” God saw the confusion in my face, and did not hesitate to explain.

“Human beings live according to the dictates of the Tao,” God said, “and as such everything they do is both good and evil, but they have an inability to see it this way, focusing on one or the other. There are three types of people: the sinners, the righteous, and the justified. The justified are those who believe that following rules and living up to certain standards is enough to save them, much like the Pharisees. I forgive them for I admire their earnestness, but when they impose their standards on others, they cause great injustice. Worse, some of them believe they have no sins, creating a hypocritical system. Still, these people suffer from their own standards so I forgive them while giving them tough love. Then there are the sinners, which make up not only much of the church but much of the secular world. These are people with definite flaws, who spend much of their lives pretending to be normal. I forgive them, but getting them to accept my Grace is often difficult, because they feel like they have to measure up. And lastly, there are the righteous, those who understand my Grace. These people, I try to build a relationship with, and I encourage them to help out the other two. But all are saved. What matters is that people in this life can create misery for themselves or others, well before the Afterlife.” I wasn’t sure that I understood all this, as it was kinda confusing.

I asked another question. “What exactly is a Soulfire? I mean, what is my power, really?” But instead of telling me, he showed me. I stood in a room with various copies of myself. One looked angry, and I remembered the time when I almost lost control and hurt Mom and Dad. Another looked afraid, and I remembered the townspeople before we had to leave. Another looked happy, and I remembered my best times with my friends. Another looked sad, another looked lonely, anxious, and still another looked calm, all of them making me recall memories. “So, my power is my emotions?” God shook his head, and then manifested images of Lilith, Nevras, Elias, Aqorm, Zoe, Azrael, Selqui, Yazim Jianne, and Michael. “These people,” he said, “you think you know them, right?” I nodded, “They're Mom's friends. And her husband.” He nodded, and then shook his head, “Yes, but what they really are... is me.” As he said this, I watched as one by one all of them became silhouettes like God. “You see,” he explained, “Everything that I created is part of who I am. Yazim Jianne is my desire to invent and my regret. Selqui is my sense of unbounded lust. Elias is my sense of knowledge and curiosity. And so on. Each of these people are characters. Personas. Parts of the whole of me. They are given form from my power of existence, almost like I'm the author of a book. The power of the Soulfire is not inherited, your grandmother Victoria has it, but plenty of families seem to acquire it at random. It is a consequence of having a unified self, and the ability to question and reshape reality. Yes, your emotions do make your powers stronger, just as they do for your mother. But they can also distort your sense of self. Your power... it's similar to sorcery. Far beyond moving objects and creating fire, you can change the local reality. But, unlike Yazim Jianne's power, there is no sense of disciple, it is not governed

by rules or spells or anything like that. It isn't countered as magic would be, since it isn't cast. But this is also its greatest weakness." I was confused now, so I asked, "What do you mean?" God explained, "Child, do you know what a delusion is?" I nodded, "So you're saying..." God split me into several bodies of Tamashii, "Each of these is an emotional aspect of yourself. As you know, your power can work on yourself, and the world immediately around you. Your power works on three principles, a firm sense of self, some amount of control over your emotions, and a good grasp on reality. But some people have tried to alter the world outside their territory before, the world they can only imagine. The problem is that this creates illusions. Illusions of unseen enemies, illusions of fear, grandeur, or hope. And there's another problem. You've heard, I gather, of Newton's equal but opposite reaction, correct?" I nodded. "Well," God continued, "it applies to the power of the Soulfire as well. When some people imagine great prosperity and joy, others see division and violence. Yin and Yang. Sometimes, it's even the same thing. I remember the 2016 election. For several years, liberal policy had been pushed down the throats of people. Most people are content with their daily lives. They just wanted to mind their own business. But increasingly, their small towns were becoming filled with Whole Foods, trendy shopping districts, and PC Principals. They couldn't take all of the changes. And the stress and angst awakened their latent powers. Unlike thaumaturgy, the powers of the Soulfire have always existed among a few of the population. So, contrary to the Russian hacking myth, it was really Soulfires that decided the election. But it was also other Soulfires that created its aftermath." I asked God for clarification. He explained, "There were a number of people afterwards that were in a state of fear. They were convinced that the new leader would bomb Denmark or that the internet would collapse, or any number of things mostly dreamed up by *South Park*. And then people began to declare that the current president was #NotMyPresident. Only, when Soulfires begin to resist consensus reality, it creates distortions. The breakdown of other common sense was everywhere. Why, people were eating Tide Pods! Because people were literally trying to fight their own reality, the basic state of perception became distorted, and people were literally not seeing the same events the same way. They called it 'fake news' but the truth was far more horrifying. These ripples were creating a schism where **reality** almost broke down entirely." God paused for dramatic effect. "Look again at these other aspects of you. One in particular," he said, pointing to the calm one, "what's different about this one?" I looked at the others. The rest were happy, sad, afraid, angry, and so on, various shades and types of positivity or negativity. The calm one alone was completely neutral. As if reading my mind, God responded, "Yes, this one is completely at balance. This state... it was never a natural emotion, but rather a gift from the original Buddha, and again from the Miroku. The ability to remain calm, to reject both good and bad reality, in exchange for consensus reality. Suppose you were invaded by aliens tomorrow, or someone on the weather had announced that a massive tidal wave was coming. Your fear could create an awful situation, but after calming down and convincing others to see the event as unlikely using the power of the mind, the entire event would simply fade away to nothing." He went on to explain that this was essentially the plot of a Happy Science film known as *The Rebirth of Buddha*, which involved a creepy cultist pretending to be the New Buddha, and the real Miroku, who was entirely too sharply dressed for a holy man. I resolved to watch the film later.

"So one last thing," I asked, "if I control my personal reality, and everyone that I meet is potentially a fragment of my own personality, then how can I be sure anything is real?" God groaned, as apparently this was something that going to take some explaining. "You've heard," God asked, "about the Evil Genius theory?" I vaguely remember Mom telling me that that was a thing, but she didn't go into any detail, probably because she wasn't very familiar with it. But I knew about it, because I was a genius and studied all sorts of things from a very young age. "Sure thing," I responded, "There's a genius that basically invents a sort of illusory world for you to look at so it's never clear whether that world, and by extension, the world we live in is real or an illusion." But even though I had studied this, I failed to make a connection. Hey, I'm just a kid! I may be a prodigy but I'm kinda ignorant about some things. Anyway, God saw my confusion, so he asked some Socratic questions, "So what do you think is real? What exists?" Hmmmm... After

some thought I concluded, “I guess whether the world is real or not, it still has to exist if only in your mind, even to be fooled. This also means that I have to exist, in order to experience that world. And it means that this God, or evil genius, or whatever needs to exist in order to fool me. But... I feel like there's more to this?” God nodded, “Yes, the possibility exists that you and this genius are actually the same. That is to say, your power warps reality in the same way that Ambrosia's Oracle powers alter how things are, or my powers change the world. Only the appearance is different.” My mind was blown. The realization that I could create anything out of my imagination made me lose control of things for a second, and random objects started to appear. God spent some time teaching me how to chill, how to dispel my own stray thoughts and counter other psionic abilities, how to prevent other people from controlling my reality with their illusions. And then God disappeared for awhile. Mom apparently had finished whatever she needed to, as she opened the back curtain of the tent. “What did I miss?” she asked. Well, pretty much everything. Geez, where was she all this time?!?

AMBROSIA

While I was resting and God was talking to them, I heard Michael's prayers. Bring back weather and seasons, get rid of the round Earth that spun too fast and made motion sick people throw up and oppressed the southern hemisphere, and well... I could do the thing with random creature encounters, but my poor daughter. How could I possibly let her get hurt? Oh wait, didn't I have her fight centaurs earlier?

The Earth I tried to make was similar to the “waffle iron” model that God had created before, when you know, God wasn't part of my consciousness. Unlike the previous model that God made while She was dreaming (and you know, not part of me directly), this one I gave birth to, so it was mostly real. But I was having real trouble with the model, and had to reshape it entirely. In order to imagine something that is fully real yet able to be reshaped at a moment's notice, I want you to think of oil-based clay that is able to stay in shape without ever being fired, is very solid before heating up, doesn't break down in water, and is just really fun to work with. I was a part-timer now, which meant a lot of this stuff had to be done during my down-time, and God couldn't do miracles as often as before. When I knew that God was in me, it meant I had to take responsibility.

While this dual-hemisphere flat Earth was easy to manage, there were definite changes I had to make. For one, apparently, at about 7076 AD, the same year had been cycling over and over, and God just messed with people's memories who noticed. To make sure my daughter grew up, that was like the first thing to fix. I even dug up an old calendar and adapted from that, renaming the months and weekdays back to their old ones. Sorta. Saturday was still the Day of Rest in regards to magic and in general, and Sunday was still a Holy Day so these last two names were interchangeable with their new ones. And since I didn't know exactly how the months worked, I just set all months to thirty days, and dealt with the excess five days each year by piling them up until later. After every 50 years, I'd just have a kinda Jubilee for that extra 250 days where all debts got forgiven, prisoners couldn't be held, and farms produced enough food for parties everyday. Basically, I had to balance out all that lost time and long parties is the **only** way to do it. Also, in the old model of the Earth, there was nothing actually outside the firmament except me. That is, the Earth was like a terrarium that had a screen, which during the day was covered by a blue sheet while the night was like a black sheet with pinholes. The “stars” in essence were pinholes showing the white area beyond the Earth, and to a large extent travel through space involved entry into the empty space where God lived. In any case, when I made everything real, the firmament instead became a porous layer of water and air and ozone, and the outer space and stars became real. I was unsure what to do with the sun and moon with this model, so I made them circle around the double hemisphere in an infinity pattern, rising in the north, and setting in the equator, then rising in the south. The problem was, people living near the equator tended to get incinerated. Eventually, I just nixed the physical model of Earth and let Jesus handle it. While I was sleeping and creating, I got a memo from Jesus (who I guess now that I think about it, is probably my cousin). It was written in basically some sort indecipherable math or physics language, but somehow, I understood exactly what he wanted me to do.

Rather than the old model of a split hemisphere flat Earth, or a round Earth with its own issues, Jesus proposed merging the two hemispheres into one hemisphere with a single dome. The Earth now had an atmosphere centered around the North Pole, moving the Council where at where anyone could travel to them, moving the (formerly) Eastern Continent where Kirin and Kushiyama were around the edges in a circle, and moving the other islands in a circle between at different latitudes based on climate. The Earth was still flat, since it had to hold water (I had experimented with the round Earth but it didn't work), but instead of having a mostly flat base, now its sides were all surrounded by rock to make it like a basin. North was toward the center, south was toward the edge in any direction, and east and west appeared to be straight left and right but were actually clockwise and counterclockwise. Because of spatial curve, this meant that going south would eventually lead around the Eastern Continent but because this curved at the poles, going south eventually meant curving clockwise around the Earth which made it impossible to fall off the Earth. It was also impossible to dig through the Earth, because I had piled up countless layers of soil from ages past with fossils and rare artifacts, finally ending in a lava core and firm rock below it. On the other hand, since the atmosphere was less curved it was now possible both for aliens to visit us, and for spacecrafts to leave Earth. This meant that now it was technically a sphere, but one with a top of atmosphere and a bottom of lithosphere (you know, rock layer) and where people in the southern hemisphere weren't standing upside-down. The lithosphere formed a rim of rock that held any water near the edges inside, but while people at the edges could see the start of the atmosphere and this rock wall, they couldn't touch it.

Compasses now would always point north, since north was the magnetic center, and south was away from the center. This also meant that the sun would orbit the Earth clockwise, rising in the east and setting in the west while appearing to be traveling in an arc due to human angle of viewpoint. The sun typically circles the equator, one of many concentric rings, moving north towards the center during summer and moving south in the winter (in the northern hemisphere). The moon as went from east to west but at a different pace, and its shadow caused the phases of the moon until at last it was full and gave off its own sort of light. Eclipses happened semi-regularly as they were just a matter of the two catching up for a few seconds with their different timing. The stars were aligned around the planet but both the north and south hemisphere could see the same group of stars since there was one dome. That this was now a more realistic planet allowed me to retain my design of other planets and stars outside of Earth. I even made planets for all those space aliens that were previously only in different dimensions! Needless to say, since I was doing all of this while I was supposed to be dreaming, I woke up very tired and was not much fun to be around for the next six days.

As a result of Jesus's proposed edits, we had the Presence shining on us. Unlike the sun, it was not too bright to look at. And unlike the moon, it was never too dark to see. In fact, Jesus's Presence helped balance the extremes of the sun and moon, being a kind of third light in the sky. While the sun's light was a warm reddish color and the moon glowed with a cooling yellow, this presence was a healing tone of green. Yup, like traffic lights. These three tones worked together well, each having a specific role in how the world worked. At any time, we could simply talk about our problems and have someone there immediately, for this is what I mean by Presence.

As for creatures, there were random encounters, but much like an “Deer Crossing” sign of course told the deer exactly where to cross (this is totally how these signs work), creatures would now appear only in areas with tall grass. I figured while I personally didn't want Tamashii to get hurt but plenty of people did want to hunt critters, so I told her that she'd be safer if she just stuck to the path. Tamashii listened to me, of course, because she totally isn't an adventure addict. Well, maybe a little.

Anyway, I met with Michael, and begged the angel to join, gaining Michael's Crest in the process. We still had other stuff to visit, and Michael was kinda psyched to be spending time with the friend whose daughter had told so much about. As we left, some of the old flora and fauna of Heaven came back, so I wanted to leave before Tamashii was bitten by a lobster bug. What horrible creatures!

At last, we had received all of the Crests again. We had only to go to the Mountain of Fate again and... Wait... I asked God, “How exactly do we get to the Mountain of Fate again? I mean, there's still a portal but it leads to the First Universe. A lot of other places aren't... exactly there anymore.” He shook his head. “You don't,” he said.

I began to sweat. “But... how...?” I stammered. He advised me, “Go to Lao Tzu. He will be able to complete your quest.” Wait, I just petted that cat not long ago. Why didn't he mention anything? Maybe I should have given him some milk?

JESUS

I was going to interrupt,but I decided it might be rude. Sorry to impose. Theologically, I'm actually her Son. Sorry, incarnation makes this confusing. Ambrosia is a personification of my Father. Some of you here don't understand the Trinity, so here goes: there are three Persons of God, each of which is distinct yet of the whole of God. They aren't each other, but all of these Persons are God. When we talk about God, we usually talk about my Father, but I'm also God, as is the Holy Spirit.

But what about the Holy Spirit? The Holy Spirit is a Soul consisting of all living souls. In theory, the Holy Spirit could become a person, but uhhhh it involves merging all bodies and souls together into a singularity. This was the case in the Beginning, but to try to do it right now would involve a lot of gore, violently colliding into a single entity. Yeah, let’s stop thinking about that disturbing image, you humans will have nightmares.

Ambrosia as an incarnation of God the Father is completely human but also completely God. Since Ambrosia's a bit less... restrained than God normally is, typically in her human form she has relative amnesia about her powers, being no different from other people. She would otherwise not have been incarnate, as didn't happen through the Bible or most of Earth's past (I became incarnate, but my Father was Creator and thus needed to remain as he was), but she wanted to experience life as a human. And discovering that Earth wasn't as real as it should be, she became pregnant with the Universe Egg to make the Earth real. She became incarnate to accomplish the Oracle of Tao's duty, of course. Including her *other* task. But let's not give too much away.

CHAPTER 10

In which there are scenes from Tamashii's childhood. Because she's cute. And filler.

TAMASHII

Three years ago, we had been forced out of Opening and took up residence in the outskirts of Phoenix. We started a farm there and grew cabbages and carrots, chopped wood, hunted, fished, and bred wild turkeys. The turkeys turned out to be capable of fending for themselves. They ate not only the nearby leaves, fruits, and nuts of plants, but also lizards and bugs. Unlike farmed livestock, we exerted basically zero effort keeping track of them, hunting them only when they became a nuisance like the deer that were also in the forest. Plus, they were cutely arrogant. They looked like Churchill.

Mom taught me how to fish and helped us catch some of our food. But hunting and fishing were kinda just fun activities. When I was finished with farming chores, I’d just typically disappear into the forest and wander around for a while. Sometimes, my folks joined me, other times I invited my friends. For the whole year, they kept me away from town. When I was about seven, they tried to teach me about traveling with friends or with parents to be safe, and gave me a small allowance. But unlike other little kids who had a vague memory of time and how events shaped together, I had a great memory and understood exactly why they kept me out in the woods. I had little desire to leave. I began to visit town only once my friends proved they could keep me safe. Gradually, I moved from being deeply fearful of life in towns to shopping and having dates outside with friends. But still, even today, I preferred the great outdoors to the city.

Today as other days, I hung out in the forest, climbing trees, and chasing after turkeys. I didn't really have weapons to hunt them with me, but it was fun to chase them down. They were huge snobs of the poultry world, like some character from *Downton Abbey* that made snarky comments. And they were just so fat that I had to! After getting that out of my system, I joined Sastra climbing trees. Well, I climbed. Sastra kinda just

jumped on top of the tree, jumped to another one, and swung to a third. One could do worse that swinging birches. Portia didn't see the point. “Nah, I can fly,” she said, “why would I do that?” She did seem to enjoy some of the other stuff, like fishing and exploring. I even got her to help me chase one of these guys around!

AMBROSIA

I was there when Tamashii was born. I was there when she learned to walk. And she was far more coherent at talking than most children her age (she learned to talk about as soon as her mouth worked that way, and seemed to pick up language by reading our mind or something). Walking on the other hand, was a little more tricky. Then her psychic powers developed, and within her territory, she could basically levitate around the room. I knew this child, and for the most part, I loved her. Although, that day I was worried to death. It was the scariest moment of my life, far worse than fighting any creatures.

I told myself that I would never spank my child, not for any reason. But two years ago, I realized I needed to teach her a lesson. There were households back before the 20th century that spanked on a regular basis, there were those in the late 20th and in the 21st century that refused to even say no when a child grossly overstepping his/her boundaries. I realized that day though that spanking was the only right thing to do here, because it made Tamashii aware that she wasn't invincible, that death was painful, and she shouldn't risk her life or those of others. Only actual pain could teach this lesson, and I tried to keep it brief but memorable. You know the expression “this hurts me more than it does you”? Well, it's true. She was slapped in the behind for about a minute, she felt the pain for about a day at most, and then she simply resolved to not do that again. She went back to playing, and just stuck to safe activities. But I was haunted for several years worrying whether I was too hard on her, whether she was permanently traumatized, whether with my already serious nature that she would decide that I was a cruel parent.

Maybe I should talk about what caused this whole thing. So typically, Tamashii went to the mall in Phoenix, since the small town had built up massively in the last nine years. Or they went climbing, which was a bit dangerous, but they stuck to trees. Or they fished or hunted. Given what was around here to do, this was most of what they could do. Typically, things were safe enough that I didn’t worry. There was a Crystal Mirror theater, a restaurant or two, they had paintball and laser tag, and a few other things they could do like ride horses (Tamashii was really too young to ride an ostrogoth and nobody would let her, because it was dangerous). But one day, she decided this was “boring” and went by water train to the island where Opening and Shoten are. I awoke to a hastily written note in my mailbox mentioning that they had gone to Tsukuyomi Mountain, sent apparently by Portia. According to her, she was coming mainly to make sure everyone made it out safe. Sastraneth on the other hand, probably went along with it because she thought it would be fun. I guess I should be thankful that Tamashii was not a victim of peer pressure. Nope, she was the ringleader of this group.

That day, I could have stormed out after her. But I saw a large wasp stuck indoors, and spent about a half-hour trying to scoop it outdoors without it flying back in. And so, I was almost too late to help them. I found all three of them badly wounded, even Sastra who was practically made of iron. I waited for them to recover, and I let Elias and Azrael heal them. I let them explain what went wrong.

“So?” I asked, “what were you doing around there?!?” Tamashii explained, “Well, ummm, so we were bored,” and looking around the room, she amended, “I was bored. So I kinda dragged these two along for some skiing. Portia didn't want to but she figured if she had to keep us safe, she should have fun doing it. That's what she said anyway. Anyway, we climbed up that mountain, and started skiing. Well, it was fun, at first, but then when I tried to widen my skis, I still couldn't stop. I crashed into Sastra, and we starting rolling down the mountain, heading for a huge cliff. Portia went full-angel on us, and tried to catch us as we fell. But she was carrying a half-demon (which you know are heavy), plus me, plus all of her ski equipment, and trying to split her protective aura three ways. I hope you'll understand.” But I didn’t. How could she?!?

And then I spanked Tamashii, telling her what each hard slap on her behind was for. “This is for letting us worry and not telling us. You could have died out there!” I said.

“This is for endangering your friends! You almost killed both of them with your reckless stupidity,” I continued. “This is for picking a dangerous mountain to ski on! Tsukuyomi is nothing but steep drops all the way down,” I hit her extra hard on that one, we raised her to make smart decisions. “And this, is because Sastraneth and Portia didn't talk you out of this,” I spanked her as I said. Sastra objected, “Why her and not us?” I explained, “I can't *hurt* either of you two! And she's gotta understand that she's responsible for the safety and happiness of her friends. Plus, Aqorm would kill me if I laid a hand on her child. So let that be a lesson to you, Sastra. She's suffering because you didn't talk sense into her. Ummmm, I also can’t hurt you because you’re both too strong for me to hurt.”

I looked at Portia, giving her a mean glare, “And as for you...” I stepped towards her and as she was flinching from fear, and then I wrapped her in a huge hug, “This... is for saving my daughter's life. You're always welcome in my house.” She kinda melted in my arms. She was so shaken up by my apparent cruelty, that she hadn't yet understood that the reason I found it necessary to hurt my only daughter was because I was in fact concerned for her safety. Contrast this with those who *tell* you they love you, and hurt you for no reason. I spent the rest of the day trying to unpunish my daughter, treating her to whatever food she asked for, trying to cheer her up, and apologizing for hitting her. She had almost lost her life, and I had just punished her on top of it. I needed her to understand that I did that mainly because I almost lost her, and never ever wanted to see her risk herself again. She had me so worried...

TAMASHII

A year ago, I had like the worst time ever. Well okay, maybe not considering my past had a mob with the standard pitchforks and torch, but it was still pretty bad. I had just mailed a note for the others to meet me, and then I gave it to the mail crow. Normally, it would take about an hour to get to them by bird, and maybe 30 minutes to teleport to me. And because of Sastra's pendant, she always had a ready portal. And so, I waited for them to show up. And yet, they never showed.

At the time, I didn't know that the sunspots from last week had interfered with teleportation. Her necklace was shot, and while Portia could teleport freely under her own power, she spent the time there fixing her friend's magical item. I only knew that I had lately taken my friends for granted and had been teasing Portia because she was always blushing about something, and Sastra because she was a wild kid. Obviously, they didn't like me anymore. I was just some bratty kid.

I felt alone and rejected, and a cloud of darkness built around my heart. I was unlovable as far I knew. As I have explained before, psychic powers operate by territory. I understood this in theory, that my powers had a sort of area of effect, and I had a pretty big one for a Soulfire of my age. What I didn't understand at the time, was the larger implications of this. I had understood that I could actively use my power within my territory. But I didn't understand yet that my own emotions could alter the area around me. This is true of normal humans, and is called the Law of Attraction (i.e. good attitudes create good results, and the reverse is true). But to a Soulfire, reality literally changes around the person. I was sad and feeling isolated, so around me was an area where my friends couldn't enter. And so it was that my friends couldn't come to see me after they were done. The barrier was simply too thick.

My depression started to mean other things fell apart. The land rotted and dried up where I sat and cried, and extremely localized rain fell around me, making an area that was both dry and constantly raining. Yes, I know that doesn't make sense. But this is how my powers worked, it thrived on my grasp of reality. The more distorted my emotions, the more weird things became.

My mom walked over. Mom and Dad had always been resistant to my power, as I trusted them to keep me safe. Mom patted my shoulder. “Hey,” she said, “you wanna talk about things?” I started crying, “Mom, I don't know what to do! I haven't seen my friends in a whole week! They've never done this to me.” She hugged me, “I know you think that things seem bad. But there was a time when I was first with Nevras where I felt certain that I hadn't a chance with him, that if I acted on my feelings that he would hate me. So I never kissed him and barely even was able to hug him. Guess what? He

left me. But I tried to change my decisions and my outlook changed. When my outlook changed, my life changed. And then he became my husband and I had you. Why don't you go try to find your friends? At the very least, you can get a reason why they were held up. Maybe the mail got lost?" While I was a bit more pessimistic right now, I brightened a bit. The rain seemed to be slowing down. I walked toward town. And then I collided with my friends. We spent a few minutes picking each other off the ground.

I wasn't sure whether to be frustrated or happy to see them. So I asked, "Where were you all of this time?" Sastra explained, "We couldn't enter! It was like there was a wall around your house." I was suddenly glad that I talked to Mom. My friends and I talked through the night, swapping stories of all the strange things that happened this week. They slept over that night, and we shared pizza pie while using the Crystal Mirror. There wasn't any such thing as live television, but they figured out how to string together sound and pictures together from memories and write them on a blank crystal, allowing home movies to be made. Normally, the older movies or shows were green, because they were archives. You could copy these, but never make anything. These new ones, these home movies, were red, and represented new media, even though editing was impossible. You couldn't for instance pause the film to make any CGI effects, so anything you made would up being your own stunts. It was probably just as well, though, between news and reality television, I can't understand why anyone wanted to watch something going on right now. You'd be constantly sitting around waiting for the latest update! No, far better to play outside, and when it was time to relax to simply watch something pre-recorded. This is probably why DVR made such a big splash, people were sick of having their schedule taken over by live television.

The other advance that was made were blue crystals. These crystals were actually blank so they had no information on them at all; however, they were designed to connect with any red crystals that were nearby. Because there were data and audio crystals as well as video crystals, we basically had a streaming system that also showed other stuff. Unfortunately, we couldn't connect this to the green crystals. Something about different wavelengths, so we could play either homemade stuff or we had the ability to take our pick what to watch from previous recordings. I was about to go and pop in the blue crystal, when Sastra grabbed a random green crystal, which turned out to be mom's wedding. I guess streaming video could wait. This was cool too.

We scarfed down our pie. Pizza pie used to be largely an expression, but since the New Earth, many foods became lost and others distorted by the scattered records. Pizza and pizza pie developed separately due to a misunderstanding. Those who read books about pizza knew that it was a mostly flat circular roll that was topped with tomato sauce, cheese, and other things. Now, pizza tended to have more interesting toppings like squid or kimchi or even peanut butter, since there weren't groups like the *Associazione Verace Pizza Napoletana* to tell people how pizza should be done. But other than that, pizza was pretty standard. Pizza pie on the other hand, was poorly understood, so cooks began to make their own varieties until three trends emerged: Western, Central, and Eastern pizza pie. Eastern pizza pie was a batter, almost like an okonomiyaki, with the meat or veggies mixed in. It was fried, and topped with either a tomato sauce or some type of mayonnaise sauce, and it had no cheese. Central pizza pie was a latticed pie, and mostly tomato sauce and fillings mixed into it with just a bit of shredded cheese, enough to absorb some of the moisture. Lastly, which we were eating, was Western pizza pie, an open pie with the bottom section a sort of cheesy quiche made from ricotta, eggs, and then topped with some tomato sauce to cut the cheese, only to have shredded cheese and the toppings on top. We also had popcorn and loads of ice cream. The calories were enormous but it was so incredible, that I didn't worry about it right now. And those other two didn't have to worry about it ever since they had super-metabolisms. Lucky pricks.

As tempting as it was to have a pillow fight during a sleepover, I'm pretty sure I'd get hit hard enough to bleed from my skull if I started. The strength difference was just too much. Instead we parked sleeping bags near the Crystal Mirror and watched the home movie of the wedding, followed by several cheesy romance films. We tried to play spin the bottle, but Portia had angelic and demonic urges. This meant that she was not only overly modest but anything like hugging and kissing tended to make her blush

uncontrollably, and she told me that if it wasn't treated she might even get a nosebleed. This sounded like a serious condition, so I let her go to the bathroom. I talked about boys with Sastra, but Portia didn't seem that into it. She mentioned she liked some purple-haired kid but wouldn't give his name. Then we finally nodded off in our sleeping bags. I had forgotten that I had been lonely just earlier today.

CHAPTER 11

In which Loki makes a cameo to avoid bankruptcy, after slow work at Marvel Studios.

ESTHERIEL

Centuries ago, before even the New Earth, and when the peoples were still young, a being known as Alberich forged a Great Ring from the gold deep within the Earth. With the power of this one Ring, he intended to Rule Them All. Such ambition... we could not allow it. My search for a way to remake the Earth to a better world led me to the unfortunate pairing with the one known as Loki.

At the time, God had granted me status as an immortal named Freya, what humans would call a goddess. You see, not all angels are born, some of them have it thrust upon us. I have retained much of my beauty from that time, but have since managed to pick up a great deal of confusion. For you see, as the immortal Freya I was very much a woman, but uhhhh... whenever I acted as the angel Estheriel, I sort of had a penis...

So anyway, we decided to pay a visit to the underground cave where he had acquired this thing from water fairies after giving up all feelings of love in exchange for his goal. And I had come with Loki because he was fairly adept at trickery and negotiation, because I knew that if I brought Thor, Alberich's head would be splattered all over the cave walls. With Loki, there would be a much stronger chance that this might be done peacefully. We entered to find an old hunched-over dwarf looking at his object.

The cavern entrance emptied into a large natural room. Pillars made from mineral deposits sectioned out the walls, and there were some awe-inspiring formations. The room had a few pools of water nearby, and lava could be found below the nearby cliffs, making it ideal for forging. In the center of the room was the precious jewelry, which he proceeded to dub the Ring of Nibelungen. “It was said that this ring could give control over everything. Surely, it could grant my wish,” he said to himself. In fact, he was so fascinated with it that it took a rather loud clearing of my throat to call his attention. He looked up at me, then fascination for the Ring overcame his mind.

Loki poked my back, “Let me do the talking. Any use of force to take the Ring will alert him to our cause.” Loki was charming, in the same way as a psychopath is charming. Unlike Thor, he had a handsome face, a shock of long black hair, and was athletic without being muscular. He looked like the sort of person that would speak as a diplomat, and would probably be able to talk someone into selling their soul. I nodded, “Very well, but I still don't trust you.” He reassured me, “Relax, I have no desire for the ring. I know better.” He walked closer to him, and stretched his arms outward, “Welcome fair creature, I have heard many tales of your great power!” The dwarf stared up from his Ring long enough to raise an eyebrow, “I have heard many more tales of your deceit, Loki. What is it you wish? I will give it, that you might leave me in peace. I would like to return to sleep, if you don't mind.”

Loki pretended to be shocked by this, then added more flattery, “Oh come now, such modesty! I hear a powerful creature like you has control over the Shifting of Forms, that of being another. Surely... Surely, it would be no trouble for you to show me some of this incredible power!” Alberich looked annoyed, “Well, if it will get you out of my hair...”

Alberich pointed to me, “You there! With the wings, come closer that I may see you better...” I asked, “Is this enough?” while advancing toward him. Suddenly, I was staring at a beautiful woman with my hair and face, wearing the same clothing as I was. From any angle I might as well be looking at the mirror. The only difference was that Alberich seemed to lack Loki's trick of mimicry for voices. So I heard his disgusting gruff voice coming out of what was my mouth, “Well? How do I look?” I lunged toward him, hearing that harsh voice mocking my appearance with its dissonance, “How **dare** you!

Turn back this instant!" He did, but Loki scoffed, "Such petty magics are beneath my interest. Show me something more interesting!"

Alberich transformed into a large serpent dragon with hands and feet. He crawled along the ground, then rose into the air until he was upright, looming over us. "Well?" he said, "Sure, this is impressive enough! Leave now..." The Ring appeared tiny when compared to his huge size, having slipped from around his finger to the edge of his claw in order to fit. Loki looked unimpressed, "Yes, I suppose it is impressive. But, as they say, true power is measured by restraint. Let's see how small you can get." And so, without bothering to shift back into his original form, he turned into the size of a fly, causing the Ring to slip off. But Loki was ready for him. He tossed a bug-catching net over him, "Yes, indeed! Excellent trick! But mine's better. Too bad, huh? Now, Estheriel, here's that Ring you wanted." Alberich protested, his tiny voice squeaking, "Don't think you've gotten away with this! This Ring will be **cursed**, until the day it returns to my hand! You shall not be its master, nor anyone." He'd have to speak up, because I wasn't listening.

I left the cave with his words weighing on me. Even today, as I think on my current objectives, this still unsettles me. If the day had ended with his words there, I would have been disturbed enough. But it didn't. The worst was coming.

Indeed, no sooner did I leave the cave than some brigands tried to steal it. A group of ogres had climbed up to this spot. Now, many of you don't understand this, but ogres are in the same family as goblins, hobgoblins, orcs, trolls, oni, giants, and titans in order of size. They lack any special abilities unlike trolls, goblins, and orcs. But much like the state of mankind (according to Hobbes), they are nasty, brutish, and short. "Give us your Ring now, if you know what's good for you!" he paused, "Or else." This Ring seemed to have led these thieves right to this area, to claim it. Furthermore, the Ring seemed to be **cursed** with a terrible greed! No, I shall not keep it!

I had a goal of using this Ring in order to remake the world. Yet renewing the world in this way would simply lead to great evil! I addressed these big mannish things, "If you desire it, take it with my blessing. Do not fight me for what is yours freely! I'll even give my gold, so you can share evenly." As I said this, I laid down at least enough to equal the Ring in Gold and in gold bars, yet they took no notice of this obvious wealth, instead focusing on the fact that only one of them could possess the Ring.

It happened subtly at first. One ogre said politely (inasmuch as ogres are polite), "Here brother, you take the gold, I'll have the Ring..." The other ogre shook his head, "No brother, *you* take the gold, I want the Ring..." The way he said this was very blunt, even to ogre ears, so the other ogre snarled at him, "I won't let you have it. It's mine! It's *precious* to me." The other ogre shoved the pile of gold I'd offered at him, trying to grab the Ring, "Well, I definitely don't want your stinking gold!" What began as a robbery ended as a bloodbath. The first one pounded at the second, with his meaty fists, then the second one pulled out his club, and they continued back and forth until there were two bloody stains on the snow-covered ground outside the cave.

I fished the Ring out of the gore. "This will not suffice!" I said, "I shall suppress this away, until the unthinkable happens! ***Its evil shall be imprisoned, until one of the most trustworthy beings makes a vow and breaks it***." This event would haunt me from then on. This is why, despite many easier ways of changing the world, I had decided to instead go ahead with my plan.

CHAPTER 12

In which Lina Inverse briefly shows up only to go for broke casting spells.

AMBROSIA

"I just petted you not long ago. Why didn't you mention anything?" I asked Lao Tzu, when we got to the mountaintop. The cat rolled over, scratching its ear and yawning. From the last Crest, we had taken our boat to park just west of the mountain where Lao Tzu lived. Tsukuyomi Mountain was, as always, a hard climb but by this point we were beginning to see it as good training.

"Mention anything about what?" the cat asked. I had to explain that if I had known about him being the one to awaken my Tao ability earlier, I would have begged him to

come with us. But he told us of this parable where some ugly guy called Ai Tai To impressed the Duke of Lu and was invited into the city, only to become deeply unhappy. I couldn't really get what he was saying, but it sounded an awful lot like he was unwilling to leave his mountain. He didn't have to tell some long story to tell me that!

The cat rubbed himself before sitting up, and then he began to quote stuff. I wasn't sure why, but the more Lao Tzu did this, the more I felt that he was somehow trying to talk me out of claiming the power of the Tao that was rightfully mine. "If you overesteem great men, people become powerless, and if you overvalue possessions, people begin to steal. The Master leads by emptying people's minds and filling their cores, by weakening their ambition and toughening their resolve. He helps people lose everything they know, everything they desire, and creates confusion in those who think that they know. Practice not-doing and everything will fall into place," he said. I kinda wondered at this point whether he was hinting that maybe I should reconsider my entire quest. But no, I had committed to this. And he said, "Now arms, however beautiful, are instruments of evil omen; hateful, it may be said, to all creatures," and also, "he who delights in the slaughter of men cannot get his will in the kingdom." Should I also refuse such a power as the Tao? Was it in fact mine to hold? But nah. I was the Oracle of Tao, and this quest and this power were mine. And then he said, "Throw away holiness and wisdom, and people will be a hundred times happier. Throw away morality and justice, and people will do the right thing. Throw away industry and profit, and there won't be any thieves. If these three aren't enough, just stay at the center of the circle and let all things take their course." He tried to jump on my shoulder again, but I sidestepped.

Yup. Like the Aiken Master, he was trying to talk me out of my quest. But I was committed to it. I believed sincerely that it was my duty to confront Estheriel. The cat shrugged. Lao Tzu touched his paws to my forehead and to my chest, and suddenly I could feel the power returning to me. This was now about the third time that I had gained this power, and I still wasn't really sure what it was. I felt like if I ever did manage to define it, it would somehow lose its power or mystery. So I spoke no more to him, as he went back to sleep, indifferent of the fact that I'd ignored his warnings (or whatever they were). Stupid cat. Here the world was at risk of being destroyed, probably, and he was lazing about and rubbing his ears! Well, I suppose I could pet him a little...

ESTHERIEL

Seeking answers after I rebelled against Heaven, I went alone to the Ancient Library. Unlike the Great Library, this was a strange place filled with an endless number of stone tablets. You see, the endless amount of information that was needed in this archive required an endless amount of stone tablets. The question nagged at me, why would God fully support the Council falling? Why did God refuse to act, and instead leave it to the Oracle of Tao? There was something going on here! And I would find it out.

I started my research at the beginning, reading several contradictory accounts of the creation of the Earth. It seemed almost as though someone had written a story over time, and not updated the old sections completely, resulting in a mishmash of nonsense. Even the things said about the world, whether its policies on taxes or the existential state of things like how thaumaturgy worked, seemed to change from one stone tablet to the next. After reading tablet after tablet, I wound up more confused than before I started. There was something strange about how all of these things contradicted each other...

But I found the object of my search. It had taken days of reading but... "Interesting... So this is the true story of the Oracle of Tao," I said. It all made sense now, why God was so friendly with the Oracle, why the Earth's history and its rules of magic weren't consistent, and why the Council fell and it didn't matter. Now I knew why. And so, I decided, "Then, I should be able to use the power of the Universe Egg to remake the world as I see fit. Very well, I guess..." I looked around and said, "Hmmm?"

In this very library (of sorts) was an orange-haired sorceress and a blond swordsman nearly twice her height. I was surprised they even made it here; this was an area that should be out of reach except by flying well above the mountains. "Mortal, how did you get to this place? And what business do you have here?" I asked. The blond didn't look terribly intelligent, but looked lean yet strong enough to fight a demon. They introduced

themselves as... Rina? And ummm... Gary? I think that's what they said. She continued, “As for the rest, well, a Dragon took me here, but lately I haven't seen her.” Ah, that explained it. Those dragons were forever taking humans to exotic locations and telling them that only they could save this or that. I think they had a warped sense of humor. She continued, “I'm looking for a power that can defeat upper level demons, that humans can use. Wait... I recognize you! You're that fallen angel, Estheriel the Just.”

I stared at her for a long moment as the clouds below us went by. Finally, I nodded, “I'm impressed. You're remarkably informed for a common human!” She looked frightened. As I was still an angel, it was my natural impulse to relieve fear, as many other of my kind had before. Even this mission could not change that. I told her, “Relax. I'm not going to hurt you. In fact, I think I'll help you....” Using the Script all of my kind were gifted with, I manifested the most powerful spellbook ever. For some, it was known as the *Claire Bible*, but we knew it as *Handy Tricks For Impressing Your Friends.* Not that the average person could tell what the title of the book was anyway, both the spine and the front were blank. The dust jacket of the book was white, and the pages were black, filled with gold text. Whoever came up with the first copy of the book figured it would look snazzier. My Script only summoned a copy of the book, after all.

The enormous book landed on the ground with a thud. “Read page 200 of the index page for the section on spells to slay a demon.” She looked at the book with astonishment, “Of the *index*...? Geez, this book is huge. How did you just throw it?” She shrugged, “Hmmph, well regardless, you'll make a good first target, won't you? I heard about your rebellion.” And so, she said a long incantation, manifesting a flickering black sword to swing at me. And yes, this was very powerful against demons and Monsters, able to cut through even their dimensional ties so they couldn't teleport away.

And yet, she overlooked something. For you see, angels are immune to such things. I sighed, “As clever as you humans can be, you seem to seek your own destruction. Honestly, did you think if I gave you the book, I would show you a spell that actually worked on me?” I summoned forth a bolt of static electricity just enough to stun the two of them. Sensing her fear, I placated, “Relax. I make it a policy not to kill humans unless needed. However, I'm going to need you two to return to where you came from, okay?” And so, I opened a vortex and teleported them to the land below us. That should take care of them. They would probably do just find as part of their own story.

I summoned my allies, “Odin, Brunhilde, my valkyrie! Come forth!” A valknut (the symbol, not the knight with the same name) appeared in the ground near me, and a group of women in winged helmets and pastel-colored hair arose from the portal. Traditionally, humans thought these women were all busty and obese, but actually only one of these were true. Each of woman was about 145 pounds and about 5'10” with lean muscle, with most of their body fat centered up top. The best looking of course was their leader, Brunhilde, who looked slightly taller (she was about 6 feet) and more muscular, yet with all the right curves. Her long brown hair with reddish highlights swayed in the wind as she carried a tower shield and a lance, and acted as lieutenant for these troops. Odin led them, and I was his mistress. Of course, to make it confusing, while he led my valkyrie as Odin, he also was known not only as Santa, but also as Odr. As Odin, we had to keep our relationship secret from Frigg, but as Odr he was publicly my husband. They looked different as well, with Odin having only one eye, while Odr lacked control over crows.

“You called, Mistress Freya?” said Brunhilde. As you know, many of the deities of old are actually angels or immortals. I was once called Freya. But I was tired of that name, and tired of that role. I was one of God's archangels now. Only, now that was gone too. “I told you to stop calling me that,” I said to her, “I'm Estheriel now.” She rolled her eyes, as my guy spoke, “What is your news, wife?” I explained, “Tomorrow we march. The Universe Egg shall be ours to use...”

The next day, we stood outside the Universe Egg. It had taken some flying to get from that place to here, but the valkyries and my lover and I were not afraid of hard work.

So this was the famed Universe Egg... The Universe Egg was something to behold. Unlike a regular egg, it was mostly black with white speckles, resembling the cosmos. Not only that... “So strange, it's reflecting itself,” Odin said. He was right. The Universe Egg had a white afterimage nearby in eight directions, which in turn reflected back to the

main one. I explained, “My readings explained that too. Before the Oracle, existence was a Dream without a reflection, but now that existence has become true, all existence leaves an afterimage.” Odin asked me, “So, dearest, what is our plan?” He always expected me to make plans. I wasn't some evil mastermind, you know. I explained as much as I knew, “Ordinarily, only the pure of heart are able to enter this Egg without a special item known as the Orihime Flute. But I believe in our cause, we should not need this flute, except as a last resort. Enter my Valkyries! Enter with me, my love.” As we entered, the Egg gradually became less reflective and more firm. When the first valkyrie entered, they just kind of phased through and the the Egg was still showing all those afterimages, but by the time Odin and I got to it, we were basically needing to push our way through, and there were only the dimmest light being cast by the Egg. After I entered, it closed behind us, and it appeared to be opaque. Now we would wait for the Oracle to come and stop us. Of course, after I put up a barrier to prevent them from doing just that, it took longer than it should have, but that barrier needed to be there.

CHAPTER 13

In which the Universe Egg turns out to have a pretty firm shell. And nice albumen.

ASMODEUS

I had just finished supplanting the governments of Gruumi, Kushiyama, Hinata, and Opening either with demonic rule, or simply destroying them. So far, my campaign was a relative success. I had no luck with Aiken Monastery, but I probably couldn’t do that.

Soon, I would also extend demonic forces to Phoenix. All I had to do was tell a few small sob stories about the war and tourism, and how Hell had suffered greatly and needed a country to stay in for the time being. After that, I would work in stages to undermine the centuries of Phoenix's sovereignty. They would welcome us, and we would destroy them. They wouldn’t know what hit them.

LILITH

We landed at the town of Phoenix to rest before trying to enter the Universe Egg. But something was weird about this town. I don't remember the streets so filled with demons! Especially not Phoenix, which Nevras had told us was known for its sovereignty and indifference to tourist trends. So what was going on here? “We need to go to other towns,” I said, “There's something fishy going on.”

ASMODEUS

I thought I noticed Lilith for a second, but then they flew off on their big dragon. They must have had other matters to take care of. All the better, my plans in Phoenix were about to go into action. Soon all that was needed was to take the Council.

LILITH

We checked out Gruumi. It was a wreck. But it was always a wreck, so this really wasn't anything dramatic. Likewise, Opening was always a shithole, so Ambrosia was in fact convinced they had actually improved the town by demolishing the carbon copy huts that had lined the slums. But I'm not convinced that tearing down the walls of their town, killing most of the guard, burning buildings, and reducing the city to poverty and despair was a good solution for the Department of Commerce. We saw other towns too, like Hinata, famed for its tourist culture, as a hollowed-out shell of itself. It had money to spare, so probably they would probably be back to their old self the next time we visited. But for now, its quaint shops were burned by Hellfire, its women and men all looked violated in multiple ways, and its small tourist town vibe were ruined by immigration. This was not the Hinata we remembered.

“We need to go back to Phoenix and stop them,” Ambrosia insisted. Nevras shook his head, “They will never believe us.” Elias, always the thoughtful one, declared after a few moments, “Maybe so, but I think I have a plan.”

GREGORIUS

I am branch manager for the bounty offices around Hinata. I daily accept claims of crimes committed, in addition to creatures that are creating a public nuisance, and I even work with assigning other tasks such as guard duty. Bounty hunters are expected to do a wide range of tasks precisely because their rivals are the various clans of ninja. The average bounty hunter has a wide and varied list of tasks, although bounty hunters typically specialize in a few select jobs, since very few have the time or expertise to perform all tasks. For this reason, we have bounty offices to match jobs with people.

Yes, it is true. Bounty hunters are not an official law enforcement, yet the bounty office keeps official records on them. When they hand in a bounty, their name is recorded in a database, in conjunction with how many hunts they have made, and whether they themselves have a bounty on their head. Because bounty hunters are performing a service for us, even though they may themselves be guilty of crimes, they are always given an Alive bounty to allow them to face their crimes in court. But more importantly, these records allow us to rank and rate bounty hunters. It actually makes no difference to us, so long as they get the job done, but bounty hunters are by nature competitive. In any case, this database tells us about the hunters based on information they give. It tells us the actual hunter of the bounty, patron (who assign bounties), or any supports (those who assist unofficially in the bounty). In fact, God is on record as support in the bounty hunt of Cthulhu, but we don't have a reliable image, so our artists sketched something.

When a bounty hunter visits the office to ask a question or otherwise patronize us in person, their picture is added to their profile. In absence of this, their name and their fingerprints (usually procured when they put parts of a creature on the wanted poster) are used as identification. One of our Bounty Hunters refuses this, and never exposes enough of his face to be identified, so the Black Orchid as he calls himself has to personally bring bounties to us, since our collection system cannot collect bounties without recording who to send the reward to. He doesn't seem concerned by this, though, as we have never seen his face. The Black Orchid delivers bounties to our doorstop, leaving a note, and disappears without being paid. Nobody has ever seen him.

The bounty offices are like virtually any bureaucratic building, they have various form sheets in slots, they have papers required to be stamped and duplicated, and they have a number of people who hardly leave their desk. We do get holidays though.

The first type of paper is a Wanted form, where the patron explains generally what happened, whether it was a cat that ran away or a hydra terrorizing a village. They can do this mostly orally, the bounty is self-filling. The form that was blank except for a single word will immediately fill after the patron explains. It gains a picture of the creature or person and a marking of Dead, Alive, or Dead or Alive (or others, at the discretion of the patron, or if the creature can’t be killed). It also explains the reason for the bounty, and the reward. The reward is based on the level of interaction with the public, not on danger, so an incredibly powerful creature that only attacks when threatened might have a deceptively low reward. Some Wanted posters have prerequisites that a bounty hunter must have completed a certain number of hunts or have experience in a certain area (rescue, guard duty, etc) before taking the quest. Still others have a time limit. Usually, these sorts of hunts are those with a high failure rate.

If a client cannot pay the bounty (plus our 30% cut), the Wanted poster is discarded, and the patron must instead use our second type of paper, a Private Bounty poster to name their own price, and this bounty is posted only within the local bounty office. These posters rarely get answered, since they are not only hard to find, but few hunters want to do them. Those ones only get answered by a certain temperament of hunter.

Next is a Evidence form. These forms are typically required to be taken to the scene of the crime. The Evidence form takes a sort of picture that replays past events when touched. Below that recorded memory the time and location is recorded, and the Evidence form adds a picture of the hunt to any Wanted poster if it is not already known. An object can also be placed there, in which case an Exhibit # appears below the recording, demonstrating additional proof of the event. In the Black Orchid case above, whenever we've placed one of these outside our building, we have recorded a masked and hooded individual with a black orchid as a corsage. The petals have been added as evidence exhibits, but everything including his eyes are veiled by black fabric. We have

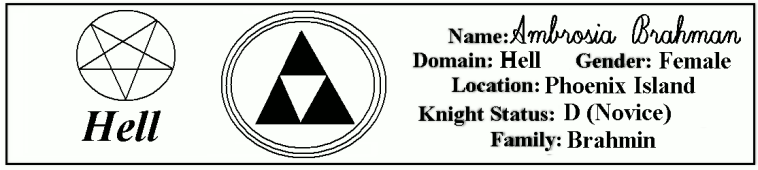
pieces of thread, but none of them have any genetic information on our anonymous benefactor, nor does the flower, a ***Brasiliorchis schunkeana***. They simply leave a note and the bounty, then disappear before we manage to find anything out.

Next, we have Request forms. These are internal bounties, that is to say, only the bounty themselves can collect. Black Orchid, for instance, has one. This bounty reads, «**Request: Black Orchid. Crime: None. Reward: 150 Million Gold (plus future bounties) Terms: Wanted Alive, for questioning. Be prepared to verify identity.**» Since we wanted to pay them back for all of what they had done, this bounty was set up to attract them, but we had to take precautions against impostors, after all. The odds were against this bounty ever being answered though. This felt like another bounty hunter was volunteering to do extra bounties for fun, and to avoid having their record look too good. If that was the case, it was probably Melinda, who only even participated when there was an Open Hunt and who had the least amount of bounties completed despite appearing to be very skilled. Or Katarina, who hunts with the help of her house cat/Monster. But I suppose it could be Yaqu, who has the highest number of hunts before Black Orchid.

Lastly is the aforementioned Open Hunt form. If a patron cannot pay yet gathers sufficient evidence that the hunt is a major one, or if a hunt involves multiple creatures, an Open Hunt is issued. These bounties are seldom seen, but whenever it happens, it is usually a big event. Such bounties cannot be removed from the board, since part of being open is that a single person can't grab the bounty and complete it. The other feature of an Open Hunt is that it usually cannot be ignored. It's big enough to cover all the other bounties on a board, and takes priority over them. In the average day, we do not receive such bounties. But today was different, because today we had a number of guests.

Ambrosia's group had collectively taken down a great number of hunts, but personally she had very few actual bounties to her name. When I saw them come in and look through our papers, I figured they were going to post a notice themselves, but Ambrosia turned out to be a cheapskate. She had millions in Gold to work with, but she refused to pay anything for the bounty. Instead, her group snatched a bunch of Evidence forms, and came back a few hours later with ample proof that some demons were apparently wrecking towns. The pictures could probably win some award.

I initially refused, insisting she pay the proper dues like everyone else, but then she decided to pull rank. Apparently due to some of her dealings with the royal family of Phoenix, she had been made a knight. I looked at her identification. The form misspelled her surname.



Since she lived in the kingdom of Phoenix, her domain would normally be Phoenix. However, the Island Closest to Hell had long ago deemed that "Anyone born within the domain of Hell will henceforth be subject to the mandate of Hell." Supposedly this also included their fate in the Afterlife. Anyway, knighthood carried with it all sorts of privileges, chief among those the ability to tell bureaucrats to bend the rules. I had no choice but to offer bounty myself. This was now an official Open Hunt.

ASMODEUS

"People of Phoenix," I carefully crafted my lie, "consider your past. While others in the modern age have begun to recognize that demons are sentient creatures with hearts and souls, those in Phoenix still reject us as creatures of evil. Why, look at the pitiful refugees from Hell. Now that their country has become overcrowded by tourists, look at the pitiful state their people are reduced to. Now look at the statues in this town, statues devoted to people who obviously hated demons." So saying, I encouraged them to destroy their own past by smashing old monuments. Many of those of Phoenix were smart enough to see though this, but I had them fight the useful idiots doing my bidding.

I had planned ahead, getting demons covered in dirt and grime, and changing their bodies to look skinny. Any real student of demons knew that they couldn't actually starve to death. I dressed them in rags to complete the illusion. They all looked like something straight out of a Charles Dickens novel, complete with wretched expressions on their faces. Demons were natural actors, and those who had gone along with my plan were intent on selling this lie. Of course, now that demons had souls, there were plenty in Hell who elected to stay there. There are good and evil demons now, like all races. But none of those good demons were here, obviously. They stayed in their homeland.

Of course, the people of Phoenix were not as easy to sway as tourist Hinata, globalist Kushiyama, or the backwards town of Gruumi. Like Opening, I encountered doubters and hecklers. "Bah!" a woman said, "Nonsense! You demons are here to plunder and despoil our land! I've heard news from other cities, shortly before they fell. They all talked about the so-called pathetic demon refugees who raped and murdered before burning the town to the ground." Now, I could get angry. Like other demons, my first impulse was to blast people who challenged me to the ground, or throw bricks at them. But this wouldn't sell my narrative, so I had to make it look like she was the bully and I was a poor victim. "Bigots!" I sobbed, a crocodile tear in my eye. "Wherever we go, we encounter these... these daemonophobes. It wasn't enough, was it, that Belial was rejected and locked in an urn? You want to blame all of us for the actions of just a few!" The look in her face changed from skepticism to fear. The charm in my voice was beginning to turn the crowd. I continued, "And look at this woman! She's one of the wealthy, the elite of Phoenix." I pointed out her fur and her pearls, which I had previously noticed were actually fake, "Behold, Phoenix! An elite among a city of elites! This last war that destroyed such property, it was all your doing! Because of you, the war raged on and destroyed much of Hell. This is why many of us have no homes today." Everything I just said was a lie. Kushiyama, not Phoenix, started the war. Hell had not been attacked, because most armies feared what demons could do. And there was no property damage, nor was there any real homelessness, despite all of our tourism. Yet, they were beginning to believe my voice, as a result of both my natural abilities of charm and the fact that much of Phoenix did actually blame itself for the horrors of war, just as the Christians thought themselves guilty for the Crusades when actually they only had fought at most for 90 years offensively. The kindhearted are easy to sway.

The woman who had objected to my words earlier was being booed as a horrible person, while people had started pushing her and even some began throwing rocks at her. She cowered in fear. I was about to continue with my speech about how demonic immigration could only enrich the culture of Phoenix and increase its tolerance (all while people were throwing stones at someone they couldn't agree with), when I heard a voice say, "That's enough of that." I turned around to see Lilith's face.

LILITH

"That's enough of that," I said. I pulled out several Evidence sheets and showed them to people. Even seeing the truth, the words of a demon had a powerful effect of suggestion, and the longer Asmodeus talked, the more people doubted their own eyes. Being a demon myself, it was time to do some talking myself. It was time to do something that demons aren't good at. It was time to tell the truth.

The Evidence had a number of physical exhibits attached, rubble from houses, bones, and so on. But this was only support, the real proof was the recordings that each one managed to capture of the "refugee" visits of each town. "Listen to these speeches," I told them, the charm of my voice partially reducing that of Asmodeus, "see if they don't sound similar." In fact, they were almost identical. And the crowd got to watch what happened later, when the demons began to rape and murder. They watched as the demons burned their towns. And they watched as the survivors desperately tried to banish the demons, but some stayed as occupying forces. "Do you see?" I said, "They aren't the poor pathetic demons they make themselves out to be. *Are they?*" I lifted a large rock with one hand, "In fact... being one of them, I can definitely say that demons are to be feared, not pitied." The crowd turned on the demons all of a sudden, "Get out of

our town, you **demons**!" One of them threw a rock at me, along with attacking the others. Not that it hurt much. But still, my pride was hurt. I mean, I was trying to help!

In any case, about this time, some trained bounty hunters came around and I watched them work. The man named Yaqu summoned some sort of elemental spirit. A girl with a long ponytail and fake cat ears called Katarina let her cat (I guess?) open its mouth, and instead of the soft mew I expect was a large tentacled maw that held Asmodeus fast. He struggled, beating back the elemental, and managed to land a good hit on Sera, who was also taking the bounty. A girl with auburn hair called Melinda tried to sneak behind him with what appeared to be a sacred dagger, but his tail knocked her back, and I noticed a small black flower fall from her pocket. Embarrassed by something, she fled the scene.

It took me working with the bounty hunters to finally allow them to properly restrain Asmodeus. But to the bitter end, he was trying to get his demonic "allies" to join him against me and the other bounty hunters. "Help me defeat these..." he pleaded, only to watch them scatter. It was no good, all of them had started to flee when they saw that they were exposed. The bounty was for "Asmodeus and Any Allied Demons" so the bounty hunters didn't even bother with them if they abandoned him. Despite demons having great endurance and strength, Asmodeus should have understood a basic truth. When you build a system on lies and distrust, manipulating others instead of cultivating real friendships, the first thing that happens is people distrust and betray each other.

"Wait, stop! No... please help," he begged the townspeople, only to watch them turn their heads in disgust. He called after the other demons, but most of them were now out of earshot. He even bargained with the bounty hunters, offering to double their pay if they would release him. His words fell on deaf ears, most of them had made a career from following through on their promises to dispatch a bounty. As long as they did good work, they were sure more would come. He was trampled underfoot like mud in the streets then hauled away into the darkness outside town. When last he was heard, Asmodeus sobbed and gnashed his teeth as he was dragged off.

AZRAEL

In any case, it wasn't our business. Instead, after Aqorm had asked around and found a helpful lead about the Universe Egg (it had apparently been sighted west of the Great Library before heading towards the sea), we flew Bahamut to its general direction. We figured we could just charge the sucker but it wasn't that simple. A barrier formed around the egg and knocked us back. Bahamut cursed, and so did we as we lurched backward, hanging for dear life. "What just happened?" I asked, nursing a small bruise from the impact. Elias explained, "I think the Embryo has some sort of barrier." Now, there are many types of barriers. Some just screen out creatures by gender or race or some other characteristic (there's even ones that only allow sentient beings like humans and elves), some are fields of antimagic, some muffle the outside environment like Ambrosia's Crest, some negate a specific element (like a fire shield), some separate water and air for underwater breathing, some deflect light/dark, some absorb or disperse energies based on principles of math or science (usually only sorcerers use those though), some reflect magic back at its source, and that's not even all of them. This one repelled magic scattering its energies harmlessly, and appeared to do the same for physical objects or people entering. Whatever this one was made of, it was a top-notch barrier. Both Lilith's Hellfire and Michael's barrier-breaking Scripts were no good. To say nothing of a vast number of attempts of taking it apart with my magic. I must have tried twenty or so means of dispelling or breaking enchantments but they simply rolled off.

Frustrated, we asked Elias, " Is there anything that we can do?" He shrugged.

CHAPTER 14

In which the group explores how to re-enter an embryo. And Sera becomes a mother.

LILITH

"Let's go to Sera and Phim, and ask them what to do. They've traveled a lot, so they probably know something that can help us," Ambrosia suggested. And then Michael pointed to Aqorm and me, "Let's have a family dinner together, and invite Ambrosia and

her family too." I thought about inviting Sera and Phim while we were at it... but at one point they did try to attack us, so maybe that idea would have to wait.

This request seemed to come out of left field, but I understood. I knew firsthand how my sleeping about had created instability and unrest in my personal relationships. I mean, I had two families, one of which I had neglected. It was time to fix that.

I was married, and I couldn't exactly be polygamous. You have to pick someone and make it work. I couldn't commit myself to Michael without hurting Aqorm, because marriage was about giving yourself totally to another. You can't have multiple husbands or multiple wives without treating one or both of them like property. But it was time to fix the neglect to my other daughter, and it was time to repair the hurt I had caused to Michael. Since I was married to Aqorm, I had been pretty faithful to her.

It mattered that Portia and Sastraneth were half-sisters, but I'm not sure that she cared as long as I stayed in touch. Any excuse for her daughter to hang out with her friends was good enough for her. And so, she said, "That's fine by me. Let's do that first. From what I found out, Sera and Phim live in the middle of nowhere, so that seems like too much of a trip right now anyway." And so, rather than making a long overseas trip, we instead parked Bahamut on the same isolated island that we had previously managed to enter a gate from. This island had no people, but plenty of forests nearby with wild game. Zoe shot an arrow through the head of an ostrogoth. The poor thing looked terribly depressed anyway with its black part of long feathers and general grumpy face, so at least it was out of its misery. Removing its feathers, we put it in a roasting pan and slowly cooked it, basting it semi-regularly with its own drippings. We also prepared a number of casseroles and side dishes such as stuffing, something with green beans and mushrooms and a cream sauce with fried onions on top, and this sort of jelly with cranberries in it. Bahamut punched down a couple of trees in her human form, and helped us make a large booth of sorts where we could sit, eat, and rest for awhile. Even Bahamut joined us, though she held back some, so as to save food for others. Later that night, I saw her foraging for other things to munch on.

Next, we had to invite our guests. After all, we didn't bring those two with us. Michael was able to not only fly, but also instantly transport (given a lot of familiarity). It wasn't much good though, as Michael couldn't actually take anyone along. Basically, all we could do was tell Sastra and Portia about the party, and we had to wait a bit. Portia got here instantly, while Sastra kinda fast-paddled a canoe and got here by nightfall. We had long talks and generally enjoyed each others' company, played some games, and then all that *Tryptophan* caught up with us. The next morning, we slept in some, and Tamashii spent some time with her friends. After that, Bahamut escorted them back, and we waited on this island. It was time to head for Sera and Phim, but I was thankful we got to spend this time together and mend some of the rifts that had developed over nine years. Sera has always been kinda rough with all of us, and over half the time we had met, we were literally fighting, usually because Aqorm was a bit outspoken.

Okay, a lot. Okay, maybe sometimes it would be better if she shut up. Yet for the most part, I loved her, and understood that both of us had our flaws but we also had reasons for choosing each other. Love wasn't all there was, we needed commitment, respect, and it was constant work. Some days it was real work, as we barely treated each other as friends. But we kept at it, because we understood that you can't just treat love as a convenience, or decide to stop loving people who are counting on you because things seem hard. Love isn't never having to say you're sorry. It's saying sorry over and over, and hoping they don't suddenly decide you don't mean it one day. And it's trying to be better, even when you fail. Love is hard. And harder still with a former lover.

And so, as part of this commitment to work, I was fully prepared to put a gag over Aqorm's mouth before she said something that made these two attack us before they gave us any information. It turns out that I needn't have bothered. When Aqorm entered, she was speechless. Just one look inside, and she turned around and hauled me in there.

Sera and Phim's place was a small wooden hut grafted on to a large cave. It looked like the mouth of a cave from the outside, but the inside had wooden walls and all manner of creature comforts. The water raged hard against the coast, and it was probably unsafe to build a house here, so they improvised. They had a number of nice furnishings: a

stuffed green chair, a king-sized bed, a lantern enchanted by actual runes, a hot tub, a serious collection of rare books, not to mention a hoard of gems that would make a dragon blush, and even a Preserver to put their food. I could suddenly tell why they were so committed to bounty hunting, their house itself sucked, but it was sturdy and fill with nice things. I imagined they were the type of people to pay in installments. In any case, I stopped looking around when I saw Sera. Aqorm was already stuttering, “S-she... S-Sera... Sera's a girl?” Sera was not in his tight-fitting fighting uniform, but now in a long white gown, and was sitting legs spread. His. I noticed that with a gown leaving nothing between her legs to the imagination, and with a number of bandages that were obviously used for binding her chest tossed about the floor, it was pretty clear that Aqorm was right. If that weren't enough, she was holding an infant on her belly, and it looked like she had just given birth recently. I was tempted to believe that this was just some woman who looked like Sera, that maybe Phim was hanging out with Sera's sister or something. Sera called out, “Hey! What are you people waiting for, a written invitation? Stop gawking at me and come here. Especially you, Aqorm! Honest God, you give me no end of trouble, don't you?” Sera scolded us, yet she didn’t look angry. She was just sassing us.

Nevras stared, and then remembered something, “Sera, can you show me that identification of yours again?” He looked it over, and I looked over his shoulder.

Before, her index finger had covered most of the top two lines because she was holding it by the edge, so we did not realize the truth. But now all this information was plain to see. “Ah!” he gasped, “Now I remember! I was very young, but I do remember a knight who was dubbed only to apparently disappear from view. I had received word that she had later had become part of the bounty division, but somehow her identity had become lost from our records. Yes, Serafina Ichikawa was a legend.”

We looked around again. A papoose was nearby, so I imagine she intended to haul her baby along on bounty hunts with her once she had recovered. And she would probably raise her child knowing how to fight, since these two were hardcore, and probably thought of nothing but fighting. “It's not his,” she offered, seeing us look from her to Phim questioningly. She explained, “We've been earning money for Phim’s seven nephews to keep that dumb broad on life support. One day, I just kinda needed something to take the edge off, so I went to the bar and I just met this guy. We had a wild night, but I don't really know his name. When he found out I was pregnant, I never saw him again. But Phim said he'd stick around and we raised this little girl together.” Now that we were here, maybe it was a good time to ask our question so she could get back to the important work of raising a child. Though she appeared to be using her child to weigh down her push-ups, so maybe it was a bit early to expect a typical mother.

SERA

I dunno what all the fuss was about. They haven't seen a breast-binding woman who wanted to kill beasties get stripped down to her undies and cuddle a baby before? And it's not like nobody's seen have seen a woman living with dwarves.

Anyway, those guys kept interrogating me about that big flying Universe Egg out there. I told them flatly that I didn't know anything, that my bounties took me all around even into Belial's Castle, but it was another thing entirely to explore the inside of something like that. “Stop hiding things from us!” Aqorm demanded, “Or would you prefer us to *make* you talk?” Hey, I was into kinky stuff too, but I really didn't know anything. Except... “What about the Orihime Flute? Isn't that supposed to break up all kinds of magical barriers?” asked Phim. I shrugged, “I thought that was a legend, though.” We looked at each other, then debated about whether or not the legend is true, before I told them all, “Oh well, if it is a real thing, that's probably in that dungeon. We

used to be adventurers, and it was the only one I hadn't explored. The puzzles were the worst, and I didn't fancy getting trapped with water rushing in if it suddenly sank." That hottie Nevras asked where this place was, and I circled his map right near here. It was easy to miss if you didn't know what you were looking for. They were getting ready to walk away when I told em, "Wait you! I wanna teach him our special move." And setting my girl down, I slowly got up. "You sure you're up for this?" Phim asked, "I mean, you just gave birth like a day ago..." Hey, no sweat. Any real man can do this move, so I can definitely do it right after pregnancy. I gave an okay sign.

"Alright, you remember what you saw, right? Phim tossing me up, then I used the air to kinda shoot my sword like a meteor, right?" Nevras said yea, "I do remember that. But how do I do this move without ummm someone tossing me?" I looked him over. He'd probably fit into some of the old dresses my folks kept giving me. In fact, that was a good idea. I motioned Ambrosia over, "While I'm distracting him with this lesson, I want you to load all of my dresses into that bag of yours. I know it can carry quite a bit, right?" I turned back to Nevras, "Hey you. I bet I can toss you in the air, easy. If I can do that, I'm pretty sure you're light enough that you can learn that triple jump that I've always had trouble with." Sure enough, I tossed him a good thirty feet in the air.

I spent the next few days giving him the hardest training he'd ever seen. First, I weighted his legs and ankles, and had him practice wall jumping. "You're gonna want to replicate this motion in midair, boosting your upper body." I had him run laps, uphill and down, climbing the walls outside the cave until at least he managed to double the height of his jumps. But it wasn't over yet. I needed to teach him to fall from great heights without getting hurt or permanently paralyzed from the neck down. Then I showed him how to use rolls and somersaults to change his fall speed, and build up the proper momentum for this move. Finally, he was ready. "Show me the SeraPhim Slice," I said, and he quickly proved his skill by drilling a hole through the wooden target I'd set up. It exploded after being struck. I praised him, "Great! But your training isn't done."

His eyebrows raised, since he basically broken his bones and been healed, and by all accounts had mastered the ability. He was done, but I had to be sure if my suspicions were right. I motioned to Aqorm and Ambrosia, "Give him a makeover!" And I got Zoe to summon a powerful storm. "What?!? Wait no... what are you doing?!?" While the other guys quickly looked away, we got him into a bra and some panties, then padded him up. I loaned him my old black stockings that I never wore, and a purple strapless cotton dress that hugged his body tightly and gave him such nice curves. His hair had grown out a bit so there was no need for any wig, so I instead dunked his head under the water and started curling his hair. Finally, I gave him some white gloves. I was right! Ambrosia was a lucky girl... Had I found him first, he'd be my sort of guy. I'd teach him all sorts of things. "I think you just wanted to dress me up!" he protested, with his voice lacking a great deal of anger that another male might have had. Nonsense, I would never want that. Okay, maybe just a little. Keeping a straight face and trying not to blush, I said, "Absolutely not. It is the mark of a true master to be able to fire an arrow in any condition. Likewise, you will have to use this in a rainstorm, wearing these tight clothes, and... I almost forgot, you need to wear these heels." He looked like he had smaller feet than the average male but these would still hurt. "Alright, practice! Run in those heels! Run without tearing those stockings! I'm not satisfied! Now jump!" The rain and wind beat hard against the coast, but I insisted that he keep the grace and poise of a proper lady, because after all, he was royalty. He looked tired and kinda embarrassed. Bah. **No mercy!** Every jump he had to land on his feet, and keep his legs tight to avoid showing anything, yet he also had to match his former jump height. It was impossible training, but I was determined to see my fetish... umm I was determined that he should master the technique. Finally, they got in their boat and took off, but I gave him that outfit to keep.

ELIAS

Ah yes, I had forgotten about the Orihime Flute. The myth states that long ago, an immortal girl named Orihime lived near the Heavenly River. Her father loved the clothes she wore, but she never managed to meet anyone. One day, she met a charming boy who made her happy named Hikoboshi. But her father decided to separate the two of them on

opposing sides of the Heavenly River. Seeing her despair, her father allowed them to meet only on the seventh day of the seventh month, when she finished her weaving. But the first year, there was no bridge and it was rainy. The next year, though, she managed to cross. As an aside, this is really a star festival of the stars Vega and Altair, which you can only see close together on this night (and only when it's not raining) The Orihime Flute is likewise able to break down barriers. Anyway, let's not talk about Nevras.

AMBROSIA

I wasn't about to let Sera have my man, so despite the fact that Aqorm was finally starting to get along with those two, we cut our reunion short. We would later invite them to meetings with our family and friends. But for now, I wanted some alone time with my husband. While our boat sailed to the dungeon given Sera's drawn directions, we went below deck. The air up there was too salty anyway, and we wanted to chill.

The ship had a few floors as a result of renovations over the few years. The barrels of salted food, logs, and supplies were in the galley, along with the seawater extractor for giving us more salt and our fresh water. Meanwhile, the Preserver for other food was near the kitchen on the floor above that along with the dining area. The kitchen featured a wood stove so cooking could actually be done within the ship, and we had created a sort of "slush fund" by selling the grease from our cooking back at ports. The kitchen also had a crude container that cooled water and air to make ice. Above the dining deck were cabins for our rooms and a large common space near the front of the ship. The heat from the stove was transmitted through pipes, so the rooms were warmer than the rest of the ship. In the commons, we did most of our entertainment during long trips, Aqorm played music, some of us danced, sometimes we talked, and occasionally Bahamut joined us when she wasn't flying around. Above this were the decks and the navigator's quarters where the ship's wheel was. Aside from more floors, one of the major renovations was a large ethereal cannon, a foremast in addition to our original mast, and a grounding bar.

Let's talk about that last one first. At some point we realized that Tamashii's nightmares tended to be very destructive to wherever we slept; while she didn't have to worry as much about running out of mystic power like most of the spellcasters here, when she wasn't conscious her powers tended to be uncontrollable. At home our solution was simpler, we just rebuilt the house. But we couldn't do that on a boat, so we installed a metallic mast of a Selenium-Tungsten alloy which acted as a lightning rod but also was effective at drawing away delta wave (resting) psionic energy. It also loaded the ethereal cannon! Not that we tried to make her have traumatic dreams, that would be bad parenting. She always dreamed that all her friends disappeared and she was alone. I told her that we were there for her, but nothing cheered her up for this dream.

The cabins were simple yet comfortable. They had a small bed that had a pullout where another person could sleep, a small table for study, a mirror, and a dresser. We were about to settle in for a good time when Tamashii burst in, "Please let me sleep with you guys tonight! I'm scared I'll have another nightmare~" As much as good parenting would be to say, "Of course you can sleep with us," first of all, I didn't want her to be clingy. And I was kinda hot for Nevras right now in that cute dress of his... So I told her to go sleep with someone else. If not, at the very least, there was a beanbag in the commons. Although I'm not sure it was very soft, since it had been squished by sitting.

TAMASHII

How rude! I tried to sleep out in the commons, but Zoe and Azrael were lying together in a couch. If I had been less educated and more naive, I might have said they were "wrestling" considering the way they were rolling over each other. But I was me, so I knew they were going at it. Apparently, finding out Sera was a girl was incredibly sexy, because I wouldn't be surprised if everyone besides me on this ship was getting lucky tonight. After some time passed, Mom and Dad let me in.

AMBROSIA

Nevras, had come to realize in our years together that during our travels fighting sandworms, olgoi khorkoi, and lesser worms... I had become very hot for annelids. I

went crazy once he covered me with fireworms. I moaned as they crawled on me, and their tiny bristles pricked at me, as we had like the best time ever...

After we'd had our fun, we invited her back in to stay with us. She looked a little sad for being left alone during that time, but after a hug and a bedtime story she cheered up. I told her *The Tale of The Plague*, a rousing and fun story about everyone getting an epidemic. She did not have nightmares about loneliness tonight.

CHAPTER 15

In which Tamashii gets to do a bonus dungeon with like 50 floors.

AMBROSIA

Having learned of a dungeon in the middle of the ocean, we sailed northeast toward this place. Its location was just to the west of an island newly formed within the last nine years. Within this island, the town of Futanari had also mysteriously appeared. The Void had collapsed, after all, so many towns and people were moved to this world. More recently, nearby towns wanted some entertainment, so they opened the Arena. As much as Tamashii wanted to fight and experience adventure like I did, we weren't going anywhere near there. They favored matches where the fighter had only a certain number of moves to finish the battle, where the creatures they fought were insanely strong fiends, or where the warrior was handicapped somehow. The more penalties accepted, the more money was made in the event of a victory. I could imagine her gouging out an eye, and tying both hands behind her back to do battle with some wicked being with six heads and too many eyes. I was her mother, damn it, and there was no way I'd allow that!

And so, well before docking in that island, we instead sought out our dungeon. The dungeon appeared to float freely in the middle of the sea, but we realized that it was actually not floating at all, but rather the dungeon had floors under the water. This stone fortress had a crude dock, so we tied our boat. The dungeon stood with a rock wall protecting it from the sea, yet to each side of the fortress was a column of rock, a cliff face that had been carved out to make room for the structure. It was unlikely that this place would last more than a few centuries, since the bulk of the building was underwater, and the cliff had a waterfall emptying just a few feet from the back of the building. The waves around here were fairly large too, so I rushed up the steps toward the door. "Where do you think you're going?" asked an unknown voice. A woman, who later introduced herself as the caretaker of this place, emerged from the shadows in order to talk to us. We explained why we were here. "You want to take the Orihime Flute?" she asked, "Okay, then I'll open five floors. Be careful, though, beyond, danger lurks." I promised I'd be careful, but she looked dubious, "You'd better be. Beyond the fifth floor, there's no return until the end, so it's sealed." She did let us in, though.

This area was designated as a bonus dungeon. That is to say, it was hard to find, and only a small portion of it was actually required. I later learned the name of this place was Sealbreak Castle. I also learned from her that the maximum number of floors was about twenty (or was it fifty?), each descending further down until the dungeon hit the actual sea bed. That seemed a tad excessive. I was pretty sure none of would... "I wanna do all the floors!" Tamashii pleaded. Oh hell no. "Oh hell no," I said. She proceeded to give me puppy dog eyes, nagging and begging as we went down the dungeon, until finally about the fourth floor I said, "Okay, fine! I'll go back, and tell her to unlock the whole thing. You guys wait here." I ascended the stairs, muttering and cursing as I went.

The bonus dungeon was a series of single rooms that each occupy a floor. Some of these seemed to be larger or smaller, leading me to wonder how this building looked like from the outside. It seemed like the entire thing must be more like stacked rooms than a proper building with straight walls or anything. I wonder how it kept from falling?

The first floor was one of those horrible puzzles with rocks and pillars, with pressure plates that apparently opened the door. The rock I pushed, however, was not heavy enough to make a difference, so I had to pull a nearby lever to lower bars holding the pillar in place, then push this on to a pressure plate. To make matters worse, a bunch of slimes kept chasing me around while I was trying to focus. I made it to the next floor by

myself, already wishing I had stayed with the others. I barely remembered how they solved these things the first time, and the prospect of remaining separated from the people I loved filled me with fear. I wondered why I pushed them away, to do this part alone. My daughter and husband should at least have gone with me.

The second floor was completely dark. But I remembered from last time that there were floor tiles that lit up in order to spell out the word «LIGHT!» and yup, we had to light up about five or seven tiles for each letter including the exclamation mark. The room's lighting finally activated, but unfortunately this also released the bars on the gates holding a number of snarling creatures. As powerful as the Tao was, I didn't have any confidence in being able to fend off a number of creatures myself. So I made my way to the third floor rather quickly. When I got there, I hoped the others were waiting, because this was one of those horrible puzzle rooms where you need a smart friend to help.

The third floor was relatively free of danger, since these creatures seemed unable to cross the stairs. It was probably the same sort of thing that keeps dogs from leaving an area (you know, a sort of proximity fencing thing). This floor, from what I remembered, had a number of unseen warp points, so I basically had to go right to go forward, or backwards to go left. I tried to jump over them, but it didn't work. After being annoyed and frustrated, I finally went to the fourth floor and rejoined the others. “What took you?” asked Nevras. I gave my husband my most cheerful face and sweetly informed him, “That damned teleport puzzle...” He nodded, giving me a hug.

The fourth floor was previously filled with creatures, but they killed them all in the time I was gone. Originally, there was a bit where you were supposed to solve a numerical puzzle based on creatures killed, but once they completed that, they just massacred things because they were bored. What? PETA was gone for 2000 years.

The fifth floor was a maze filled with creatures like dragons, demons, and hydras. I barely noticed that there was a cracked wall in time with all these critters chasing after us. But while the others were engaged in battle, I planted a bomb and found a small switch. It was really lucky we found that, because the chest holding the Orihime Flute clicked open in the distance. By the time all of us finished killing things that had too many heads or too many teeth, we were very thankful that it was so easy to get to. Especially after I found out that one of the other chests was a Mimic. It chased us around the maze until we finally bribed it to get it to let us alone. I seriously just wanted to leave after this point, but my daughter dragged me by the arm. She had that intense look again...

My daughter wasn't very strong, but she was intense. And if she actually got angry, unlike other bratty kids, she could probably blow this whole place up. So we went ahead anyway. This floor had a bunch of puzzles that seemed to thwart our standard tactic of pushing heavy objects. Rather than the typical flat plates, these ones were curved, so stuff we put on them kept rolling off. Our group split into two teams, one holding the door open by standing on a plate, holding a lever, or keeping a button pressed while the other called out, “You can move now!” Eventually, the two doors connected us to each other, and we made it to the next room. I was relieved not to be separated. Not that I was clingy or jealous (okay maybe a little), but the thought of something going wrong with the puzzle would mean that they two of us might be split up permanently.

The next floor also required us to split, this time killing all creatures on each side. It was kind of super-lame given all the floors before it, and it wasn't clear why we had to be separated. But that was what the puzzle demanded. It still sucked though.

The eighth floor seemed to be a fairly open room. The stone blocks of the other rooms gave way to ice outside, with some tall statues in three locations of the room. The statues, needless to say, were hard to get to, and it was difficult to figure out what this room was all about without skidding. The statues, you see, had some sort of writing on the metal base. We kinda smashed into it trying to get closer though. As I pushed away from the statue slowly, I read the words, «Pay close attention to where these statues stare.» Edging back from the statues, I tried to carefully skid towards the stone section, being careful not to flip over and land on my back or suddenly stop and lurch forward. But I wasn't that great a skater. Searching around, I found a small dial on the floor where all three statues lined their gaze, and I turned it. We heard a grinding sound, then a staircase pulled out as the stone retracted. Yay, we were making good progress!

The ninth floor had three triangular blocks each of which contained writing. The first said, «What creature walks on four, then two, then three legs? Speak now, or die.» Elias answered, “Man.” That one was so common a riddle even I knew it. The second one described some concept from *Legend of Zelda*. It was way too long and involved, but Elias immediately answered, “Power.” The last one, said, «The Trinity is made of three parts, which of these is called the Comforter? Speak now, or die.» Elias explained that this was the Holy Spirit. After these questions had been answered, a voice told us, “You have answered the questions. Now you must tell me, what do all of these questions have in common? This is my Fourth and Final question. You must answer correctly.” A multiple choice appeared in front of us, with the answers Three, Triangles, Love, and Eternity. Elias made a swiping motion to the left, and said, “None of these.” Wait, I was sure all of these questions had to do with sets of three! He explained, “The answer is Death. It was a trick from the start. And like all the puzzles, there were three hints. First, the answers themselves.” What about them? Seeing my look, he said, “The Holy Ghost is just that. A spirit beyond the world of the living. One could say it was this very spirit that provided the tie that saved our lives. Power is something in which to pursuit of it corrupts, and leads to downfall. And Man? Women can bring life to the world, a Man can at best help with this, and at worst only makes tools of destruction.” He continued, “Second, the thing most common about the three questions was not their answer. It was the threat of death that came with them. The threat which was never given this time. Third, the last statement was itself a sort of pun. It said things like 'Fourth' and 'Final.' In some cultures, the number 'four' is similar to the Chinese sound for death.' Even if this wasn't it, it was also said that this was a final question.” The door to the stairs opened while I was still trying to work out how that how this puzzle even made sense. The tenth floor was another maze. We made it through fairly quickly, and headed to the 11th floor.

This floor was strange. A boss of sorts appeared, a kind of super-ultra-mega-chicken thing and her harpy minions. It tossed balls of lightning in predictable patterns across the room, slashed at us with its claws, and sent its little friends after us. We'd seen stuff like this before with other creatures, but the strange thing was that only I could attack, and only by using my knife. It was like some kind of mini-game. Eventually, I triumphed, but rather than going down another floor, we took a short break. I was kinda tired.

The next two floors were fairly lightweight. The first featured a mine cart ride, and was rather fun. And the second was simply a matter of bombing cracked walls. After that, the fourteenth floor had a series of statues like that other floor, but unlike that one we apparently didn't want to make eye contact. I realized them after almost being blasted by eye lasers and barely dodging out of the way. To make matters worse, there were creatures chasing us around the room. I lured a couple of them into laser blasts, but for the most part this floor was difficult to get through. The fifteenth floor was another damned maze, complicated by incredibly powerful enemies navigating through it with us. We barely managed to defeat one of them using an incredible amount of power, and spent the rest of the time running, turning sharp corners. Unlike the other simple mazes here, this had high walls and numerous branches until we finally found the exit.

The sixteenth floor had a series of breaks in the stone where channels of water wound around the room. Somehow this room didn't flood the entire dungeon, so it was safe to assume that this area's water was carefully controlled with a series of sluice gates. While it was tempting to believe that we would be safe from the slimes in the water since most slimes can't hold their form in too much liquid (aside from water slimes, which look disturbingly like water itself, and are known to become quite large), we had other problems. Some horrifying creatures that looked a bit too much like oarfish swished towards us. Only, an oarfish didn't quite have teeth, especially not like *that*. I kinda jumped out of the water pretty quickly. After a few close calls and some splattered apart slimes, we managed to get to the stairs. The water was contained in this room with thick glass so none of it followed us. I wouldn’t want a water to flood in and kill us all.

The seventeenth floor involved moving a set of powerful lanterns so that the beam they gave off did not block the path. The light of such lanterns was so intense that I wasn't sure we wanted to walk into it. I tried using a stick, and it kinda set it on fire. Anyway, we managed. The eighteenth floor had a complex series of word and number

puzzles, as well as some colored gates that appeared to be synced with some colored orbs we found elsewhere. It was a lot of doubling back, so we split into two groups and tackled it systematically. The two paths did meet up eventually, and we got out of here.

And then, we came to the 19th floor. In the background, a complex song was playing from somewhere, and there were a series of pressure plates, each of which played a note. Since all of the notes were spaced out, Aqorm set us to work one crudely playing the same song that we were hearing. It wasn't perfect, and the wrong note or bad rhythm sometimes set off a trap, but after a few tries, we managed to disarm the puzzle and the stairs revealed themselves. The directions said there was a harder version that we could play in order to unlock a series of treasures, but considering how much they penalized... I'm afraid that was not anything remotely like something we'd want to do.

At last, we came face to face with an enormous creature guarding the entrance to the next room. Unfortunately, its name and most of its attacks were copyrighted, so I can only vaguely describe it. It was a sort of Mayan-looking statue with way too many arms, some of which were able to heal or revive other arms, while others could summon elemental powers. Before the main body could even be attacked, the arms must be destroyed. It was an epic battle that lasted for hours, but I think I'll leave most of it to your imagination. While I can't go into too much detail, things seemed hopeless for quite some time. It's attacks were very powerful, as was its healing, and it seemed like nothing could stop it. But we kept faith, and persisted despite overwhelming odds. I knew that even though I had powerful enemies, I also had friends that would stick by me even when things seemed desperate. After all, "a friend in need is a friend indeed." And they were good friends to me. After the giant being's arms were torn off, it summoned all sorts of large critters to attack us, but finally it fell to our attacks. It was, after all, only as strong as it seemed. And it seemed pretty darned strong actually. But we overcame it.

TAMASHII

We'd just beaten that huge creature, and now it was time to collect our just reward. There were treasure chests aplenty in the passage behind that gigantic critter, but they didn't thrill me. I was looking for a weapon of legendary power or something, as I made my way to the back stairs. Instead, I found a strange egg roughly about two feet tall. It looked like a dinosaur egg and it was fairly heavy. But I saw Lilith offering to take it while licking her lips as though she planned to crack it, scramble it, and cook it. Nope, I think I was gonna haul it myself, even though it was about twenty floors of staircase and the thing weighed close to 30 pounds. The egg at first was ice cold from the moisture in these lower sections and blistered my hand, but gradually my body heat warmed the thing. At the peak of every few floors I rested at the landing before turning the corner and climbing again, and each time I did so, Lilith would invite to be 'helpful', asking me, "Are you sure you don't want me to take over?" and also, "You seem kind of tired." I was just fine, honest. Even though I was breathing heavily and now limping up the steps. Finally, I called out, "**Mom!!!** Lilith is trying to take my egg away from me!" She glared at the demon, who aside from a guilty look, denied that she had been been planning to do any such thing as eat that egg. Mom was quick to point out that I had never *mentioned* that she was taking it to eat, so that must have been what she was actually planning to do. In any case, Mom and Dad took up the load, and we placed it aboard our ship.

In the months to come, the egg would hatch and I would call the fluffy creature Ayumi. Ayumi was round with stubby legs and short arms, long ears, a stubby nose, and a cute mouth. The critter looked like a strange cross between a banner-tailed desert rat and Welsh Corgi, somehow standing upright despite its improbable shape. She(?) exuded cuteness, and she was actually a powerful creature that could be used as a pet in battle. She tended to hop towards her foes, and wag her long flexible tail, before tearing them to shreds. I had seen her take down a dragon at one point! The creature was called a *Jun'nō*, named after a word that meant "to adapt." She did not become some larger form, so much as alter to survive in other climates. After reading a book called *Raising a Jun'nō : a Survival Guide for New Owners* by Tamashii Rinne d'Angeli (weird... the book was written by someone with the first and middle name as me, and it appeared to be brand new, almost like someone had traveled back in time to place it on the shelves

where I picked it up... but that's impossible), I learned to regularly feed them Dark Onion throughout their childhood to build Friendship and various berries and curries thereafter, how to avoid having my right hand bitten off by careful feeding and handling, and how to train Ayumi. Ayumi apparently did like to nip while she was teething, so I was lucky to have this book, even if it was strangely specific. As for the training, the book insisted that Ayumi could adapt to any environment, and encouraged me to toughen her up a bit. I wanted to work on her resistance to water, so when I had the chance, we took her to the ocean, and using rope we lowered her into the depths to learn how to breathe underwater. The book assured me that she could not drown, so long as I gradually increased the duration. Eventually, Ayumi's feet became webbed and a tiny slit appeared on her neck. Next, we wanted to test her rock-climbing ability and heat resistance, so we went to an active volcano near Hell. Fancying myself a lion parent, after Ayumi had built some resistance to the adverse weather and become better at climbing, I tossed Ayumi over the edge of the volcano and insisted she climb up. I kind of missed the rock edge and my pet instead careened straight into the lava, but after a few minutes I saw Ayumi's scorched body swim out. After a few moments, Ayumi began to grow fur again, and tested her cute little body against the extreme heat before finally climbing out. After a few false starts and falling back into the lava, Ayumi also grew claws in her hands and feet. After this, we wanted to make sure that my pet wouldn't be too uncomfortable in cold weather, so we took Ayumi to the middle of Kirin and plunged my little critter into the icy water. I was sure adapting to extreme heat, then following her with icy cold water would kill Ayumi, but Ayumi smiled as cheerfully as possible, enjoying new experiences. All that really happened to her was she grew thicker fur. And more interesting, Ayumi's fluff changed from a dull gray to sea green, then green with a fair amount of pink, then a mix of the light blue and the other two colors. I was feeling a bit sad for her, but she seemed to enjoy pushing herself toward new goals even if that meant suffering, unlike humans. So since she was bored if she didn't do any training, I did stuff like strapping weights to her to make her stronger and run faster. Or cutting her with small needles to toughen her skin. Or making her eat metal or rocks to sharpen her teeth. Soon, my loyal and loving pet Ayumi was the best help ever for my adventures. She even collected rare items!

But all of this happened later on, before we entered the Universe Egg, but quite a few days after what happened next. After all, we had no time for such training immediately after resting the egg in the cabin. No sooner had the egg been stowed in a warm place, and our group emerged from deck of the the ship to cast off, than we were attacked!

CHAPTER 16

In which Tamashii is caught by a butterfly. Because it's Russia.

AMBROSIA

No sooner did we exit than we found ourselves victim of an ambush by that Kochou. While it's hard to believe forest creatures could pop out of the bushes or something when we were in the middle of an ocean, somehow they managed. That girl Mariposa took a group of other adult butterflies instead of her normal infantry. In any case, they attacked hard and fast, knocking us back and spewing some sort of string around us. We were caught for hours, while they grabbed the Orihime Flute from our hands. “If you want this back,” said Mariposa before she flew away, “come to me, and we'll finally settle things.”

It was tough to free myself from that sticky substance, but eventually my hand grasped my knife and I cut those bonds. Some of the others were already free, including my husband, daughter, Lilith, and Azrael. I helped the others get loose. “Damn that woman! When I get a hold of her I'll...” I said. Tamashii interrupted, “You'll do nothing. Listen, that dungeon back there is about all the adventure I ever wanted. Now, I think it's time to admit that sometimes the whole fighting all creatures just because they're creatures is a bad plan. I mean, they do have a pretty decent motive for fighting. Maybe not fighting us, but I never said that butterfly woman is the most rational person.”

I blinked. Then I hugged my daughter. Look at her, all grown up and making adult decisions! “But,” I asked, “what should we do? I mean, the Orihime Flute is still

missing, and we do have to get it back." She nodded, "Yes, but the Council is still around, even if it's pretty inactive about a lot of things now. Let's head over to their place and suggest we meet with the Council. They can probably propose zoning measures that will allow land to be set aside for preservation, and to keep these cities from being too close to towns. And maybe we can talk to them about having some Rangers added to make sure the Sakuya and Kochou maintain a good relationship with the humans who camp nearby." But honestly, the only ones having a problem were the Kochou.

As yes, the Rangers. These weren't forest rangers or park rangers, these were Rangers. They were not to be confused with Numenoreans known by readers of Tolkien, they were a sect like the Druids with nature powers. But this was where their similarity ended. For you see, the Druids tended to be priestly types and believe in creating groves of land, and hunted only when they needed to eat, preferring to avoid interacting directly with the populations of plants and animals in favor of simply existing as part of the natural world. The Rangers on the other hand believed in direct action to save or cull species, seeing themselves as guardians of the forests. In their hands, any campers in the forest who tried to pollute or make too much noise or look funny at an oak tree would find reasons to leave the forest alone. That is, they'd kill people for littering.

And so, we boarded our boat, heading straight to the island of the Council to seek an audience. But no sooner had we gotten underway than we found ourselves under attack! No, it wasn't the Kochou. It was some strange creature that I don't recognize, a floating ball with mostly closed eyes, playing a flute while some lights surrounded it. "I'm scared, Mommy!" Tamashii admitted. I was scared too, dear. But I acted brave.

CHAPTER 17

In which Estheriel sends a goon to stop the group.

AZRAEL

I recognized that creature immediately from *Spirits and Ascendant Beings* by Harold Blackfoot. This was a Soul Piper or *Tatarimokke*. While such beings did make themselves known to the dead, they typically did not appear to living humans. At least, not without the request of an angel or some powerful incentive. I strongly suspected the work of Estheriel. That angel must have known that we were coming to stop their plans, and decided to send this ascendant being over here to stall us.

Tatarimokke are not typically dangerous. They fly around with *hitodama*, the souls of the dead, who are entertained for a time until they pass on to whatever Afterlife awaits them. Typically, they just play their flute, and even if asked to appear before humans, will typically not attack. Instead, their eyes are typically almost closed, as they tune out most events around them. However, if they see angry or violent souls, their eyes begin to open. The more violence they witness, the more these eyes open, until finally they manifest chains around a bad boy or girl, and drag them to Niraya (the Buddhist hell). But it wasn't that big a deal. They typically collect nearby souls, then leave. We had nothing to worry about because surely the group wouldn't try to fight them...

TAMASHII

"This thing looks dangerous," I said, looking at its massive round body, closed eyes, and deadpan expression while it played the flute, "I'm gonna get rid of it, all of you can just watch." I thought I saw Azrael slap her forehead in the corner of my eye but I thought nothing of it. It was time to crush this fierce creature, and show it not to mess with us! I didn't even worry that Azrael was frantically trying to signal to me.

Thinking such thoughts, I summoned my signature flames of Soulfire from raw mental energy. It wasn't enough to even singe it. I tried again, this time using closer to 40% of my power, in a move that I uncreatively called Soulfire 2. It vanished, so I must have slain it. Only, the others pointed with fear and I saw it slowly form behind me. It may have been my imagination, but its eyes seemed to be a little more visible now. I noticed a golden tone to its iris and it appeared to have no pupil. The creature appeared to speak, "Baaaa... " It figured it was just making sounds though, so I continued to attack. Something about it really annoyed me. Soulfire 3 matched the heat inside of a

particularly good forge, but nothing at all happened to it. It was time to try my other powers, I decided. And maybe I should get rid of all of those lights surrounding it, because they might be protecting it? Its eyes grew wider and wider as I used Mother Of All Flames on it, trying to roast what I later found out were souls. It finished speaking, "...aaad... Chiiiilldd..." Bad child? Hey you, my mom says I'm a good kid!

And then, my dream from earlier came true. I saw those around me fade one by one. "Somebody! Somebody!" I screamed, losing sight of Mom, Dad, Azrael, Zoe, Lilith, Yazim Jianne, Aqorm, Elias... and as they faded more and more, I realized that they weren't disappearing from me. I was disappearing from them. I forgot their names, starting with that sorcerer who was a loser anyway... and then the scholar guy... and eventually all of these faces ran together, and I couldn't remember even who they were, not just their names. I was sitting alone in a dark pit, unable to remember my loved ones. I had forgotten the face of my father. Oh yea, and my mother too. And... my loved ones? But who was *I*? Who could love me? I felt better when the coldness and the darkness of this place brightened... but then I realized that I was beginning to sweat. I remembered the flames that I had mastery of, but now it seemed as though this was soviet Russia, and they had mastery of me. I was surrounded by fire, and I began to scream. I thought I saw people with pitchforks coming for me. There was only pain left in my life.

AZRAEL

To us watching, all I could see was that Tamashii got surrounded by chains, and then pulled straight into a shadowy pit of some sort. But judging from her reactions, I could tell that she was seeing something different. Something much much worse.

I was told that Niraya was not a place with fire nor sharp pitchforks, but rather a place of torture of one's own making. In Tamashii's case though, she was chased out of Opening that way, so maybe it's the same. While the Six Paths represented fates after one's Afterlife, Niraya was the ultimate condition of being stuck, having your own desires and pain trap you in torment. This is not to say stuck forever, some resolved their issues and purified their souls, while others escaped as ghosts. People in Niraya were unfit to reincarnate again, instead becoming tormented by their own thoughts until they could finally resolve things. Okay, maybe that does sound like Hell. But it's not!

I wasn't cool with this. Tamashii could be a hothead, and occasionally a brat, but she also not deserving of this sort of punishment. That I knew of anyway, seeing as how we'd only known her a little while. The Tatarimokke was out of line! And yet, there was no way to enter Niraya. Only souls that had a bad Afterlife after a lifetime of evil actions, or who managed to impress the Soul Piper as being exceptionally violent made it there. Honestly, I'm surprised that it wasn't actually Ambrosia that managed to tick it off. But I guess she had outgrown some of her more impulsive behavior. Ambrosia was mature!

"Let me deal with that thing," said Zoe, pulling out the Sword of Sorrow. There were magical objects in the world, but Artifacts like this were very rare. The Trident of Poseidon, Mjölnir, the City of Jerusalem, the Blades of the the Seasons (of which there were four), the Sword of Burning Solitude, the One Ring of Nibelung, each of these were unique items that God or one of the immortals had a direct hand in making. And each of these were very powerful, with the Sword of Sorrow able to revive the dead or put the living to death. But I shook my head at her suggestion. Unlike spirits, ascendant beings were never alive and could not be subject to either death or an Exorcism. Thankfully, none of them were evil, they all had important functions. About all I could do to this thing was Banishment. But I wasn't emotionally up for one when I had just watched the daughter of someone who Zoe really loved get dragged under (I know, the daughter of my lover's BFF doesn't seem like much, but it hurt me to see her hurting, and she knew Tamashii better than I did). So instead, I whipped out my Exorcist Flute that I've had since visit to the Christmas Village year ago, and started playing. While my Exorcist Bells could destroy most creatures, it wasn't safe to use without killing everyone here, and these beings were one of very few things it would do absolutely no good against.

The Exorcist Flute had potentially more versatility than the Bells, but honestly, I had only managed one tune, the Song of Banishment. I played the Flute, and it responded with its own flute. Despite more years of practice, I managed to prevail not by playing

better, but by playing louder. The song was rather terrible, and it left. I was pleased with myself, but the others looked annoyed for some reason. Maybe they want to hear more?

In any case, I was depressed now that it was gone. There was no way to enter Niraya to rescue that poor child now. Unless... A thought suddenly occurred to me. But, it was crazy... Ambrosia and Zoe both saw the pained look on my face. “What's wrong, baby?” asked Zoe. “You doing okay?” asked Ambrosia. I sighed, “Ambrosia, how much do you love you daughter?” She glared at me, “What kind of question is that? I love her more than anything!” I continued this line of questioning, “Do you... love her enough to risk the life of one of your other friends?” I explained to her what I was intending. Her annoyance turned to horror, “You can't... that's not right...” But I needed to do it.

I was planning to send myself into Niraya. My blade, Eternal Moon had the ability to cleanse and purify all souls that it touched, turning even the most evil spirits into souls that could escape the Six Paths and finally achieve peace. But it was not intended to be used against its own wielder. If I was somehow disarmed, the blade would reject any other who tried to hold it, save for one whose intention was to give it directly to me. And if I tried to use it to commit suicide, the blade would not make things easy, but instead would condemn me to Niraya. It wasn't a sword that suffered shortcuts, it had given me eternal life, but if I threw that away, I couldn't expect to come back.

And yet, I had to do something. I slashed at my chest before dropping the sword, and watched as my arms and body began to turn white as I lost consciousness for the last time. I felt something coil around my midsection, but I had no time to worry about that. Things like sensation were gone in a few moments. Like Tamashii before me, I noticed a chain around my waist, but I couldn't seem to get it undone. I had a job to do, and I had to ignore such things for now. I needed to spend all of my energy remembering who I was, and who Tamashii was, and how I needed to save her. It was a good thing that I still had my sword. Even if it did seem a little bit enraged at me.

I appeared within the same sort of darkness as all who are sent to Niraya experience. I would see my worst fears played out over and over, and typically, I would lose my memory and become trapped. Yet some this didn't seem to be happening. I saw images of Zoe rejecting or hurting me, yet I remembered who I was and what I came here to do. It was then that looked carefully at the chain around me, which right at this worst period when I should have believed the image of my girl's rejection, it had taken to glowing. I noticed the heart at the end of this chain and realized that this chain was not one of the chains of torment from this place, but rather a chain from the Sword of Sorrow. Zoe loved me, she cared for me, and she didn't want me to become trapped here. And that made this image false. My chest felt warm with her feelings for me.

As I walked along in this shadowy underworld, more images appeared, but I was able to fight them. I knew that someone loved me, and was still connected to me. Since I was no longer in any immediate danger, next I needed to find Tamashii and rescue her.

The utter darkness gave way to islands of grey, filled with thick muck reminiscent of manure. The soil stuck to my shoes, threatening to pull me down into the sludge. But I remembered that Niraya was at least as much a world of sensation as it was one of actual events, so I cleansed my perception. Suddenly, I was standing atop the soil despite its suction. While I was attempting to remain afloat in these islands of muck, the only things that grew there turned out to be a particularly awful sort of weed that was a bramble plant that also had burrs. The bramble part cut me with its thorns when I tried to pass to other islands, while the burrs stuck to my clothing and continued to poke at me as I walked, until I brushed them off. No matter where I got rid of them, even into the empty air between islands, they found a way to grow, instantly forming roots and latching to the nearest island. I eventually decided to just flee the area.

The islands gave way to a sort of mist where no land could be seen. This was the central part, and I had to focus if I was going to rescue Tamashii. This particular region was so strong that I had trouble doubting my senses, even with the chain. In fact, to even see in front of me took tremendous effort, as my mind would create powerful images that became increasingly real, the more that I thought of them. Tamashii was likely to be here, as the more someone became a part of Niraya, the closer to the center they came. This was why in the beginning, I saw few humans in this place, but now, I saw people

every few steps crying or screaming. They were trapped in their own minds and their own pain. Until they could break free of such things they could never reincarnate, much less move on to their Afterlife. I thought of paintings by Hieronymus Bosch, and suddenly, I too was visualizing a scene. I tried to keep myself distracted, so I instead decided to focus on a mantra, saying the words "And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, nor rulers, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow - not even the image of Hell can separate us from God's love." Remembering that this meant nothing that I was looking at could be real, I simply ignored what I was imagining. I could see again. I breathed slowly while continuing to recite, looking around carefully until I finally saw the form of a little girl with purple hair screaming in pain. I tested carefully by poking at her, and trying to disbelieve in her to see if she'd go away. In a world of false perceptions, one could never be too careful. Finally, I scooped her up. She calmed down slightly at my touch, but the little soul was very frightened. I pulled off the ribbon that normally bound my hair in a neat ponytail. Tamashii was stark naked, as was true eventually of most of those in Niraya. It wasn't because anyone was a pervert, people who succumbed to Niraya eventually lost anything to protect their body from exposure to heat, cold, or pain. The ribbon wasn't much, but I managed to cover her extremities at least. As we walked away from the center, I turned until the chain coiled around her as well, and watched her blink as her perception of reality returned. Tamashii seemed to have some color in her body now that she wasn't tormented. "Azrael," she muttered, "thank you for coming for me." She smiled at me. And then, she passed out.

It seemed an eternity of walking, through very difficult terrain that tried to pull us closer to its center if we should forget that it wasn't real. Yet I made it away from the misty island in center, away from the mucky islands on the outskirts, past the darkness that pervaded the entrance, and towards a thick mist around the edges. This was the most difficult part, because even though my chain was protecting me, I suppose I was technically dead. This mist might as well be an iron fence, for few people had broken through, and I was about to make a hole. The chain glowed brighter and brighter, but the mist was as thick as pea soup. I tried to push through and I was having problems. I realized that I only had a few chances before despair took over, and if that happened, I would be stuck here forever. If I had my sword Eternal Moon, I could probably do something about this, but here, I was stuck. "Zoe!" I yelled, touching the mist, "*Help!*"

ZOE

This event was pretty scary at my end, since I wasn't entirely sure what I was seeing. Druids, after all, concerned themselves with the study of life, not of death. I had very little lore about the Afterlife, only what Azrael had explained about my own Sword of Sorrow, and about her sword, the Eternal Moon. I knew that her sword could basically kill creatures so they couldn't really be revived, although perhaps "kill" is the wrong word, since she said it was more like purifying them. She also said that if she ever felt depressed enough that she was about to stab herself with the sword, to stop her immediately. So I was pretty frightened when I heard this plan.

As I saw Tamashii get dragged off, body and all, I pieced together what her plan was in time to coil the chain of the Sword of Sorrow around her body. I knew that this chain responded to my will, twisting and coiling as though it were alive, and I knew that its primary purpose was to restrain. But I also believed that since it could even restrain ghosts and such, it could probably act as a tether so she could find her way back. The chain did in fact glow before gradually fading, and her body didn't seem to be in a hurry to get cold or stiff or stink of rot, despite being motionless for nearly three days. In fact, but for the white tone of her skin and the bluish tone of her lips, I could almost believe she was in a coma. You know, a really deep coma like they had in *Romeo and Juliet*.

Tamashii suddenly reappeared in the exact spot where she had vanished, and I could tell that she was not dead by checking her pulse, the color of her skin, and her steady breathing. However, I couldn't seem to rouse her. Not long after that happened, the chain started glowing brighter, and Azrael's body appeared to be struggling with something. I

jumped back as her arm shot up suddenly as though grabbing something. And then I heard her voice faintly say, “Zoe! *Help!*” Was this danger or a good sign?

Honestly, I wasn't sure what to do, so I stabbed her with the Sword of Sorrow and swiftly removed the blade, and watched as she went through a slight spasm before color returned to her skin and I saw her breathe again. However, she didn't seem to come back either. Having no other ideas, I placed her sword in her hands and closed it.

AZRAEL

Tamashii suddenly looked startled, “Your... face...” I asked, “What about it?” She explained, “You ummm, don't look dead anymore...” Looking at my hands, I realized she was right, my body had color in it again. But how? In any case, I didn't have time to dwell on such things, because we still had to get out somehow... Wanting to think, I was about to lift my hand to my chin while I analyzed this situation, only to realize that my hand was now holding a rather large sword. Now I was sure Zoe had heard me after all.

Lifting the sword, I raised it to just above waist level. I still wasn't sure how we were to leave, as this place was like a prison, but I decided to swing at it with my sword. The mist behaved like regular mist and flew around before largely settling in its original position but I noticed runes floating around in the thick mass, particularly those that marked 死 (“death”), 圄 (“imprison”), and 烟 (“vapor”). I had a general idea of what was going on now, so this was definite progress. Because of the nature of this place, runes wouldn't work, even my custom symbols. My sword on the other hand... Focusing not on the mist itself but on cutting apart those runes, I slashed the sword straight across in one long motion. As though I had placed some sort of divider, the mist no longer connected in a place where I had slashed. I slashed straight down, and the vertical dimension didn't hold together either. A small yet definitely visible tunnel began to appear in one spot of Niraya. Although some souls would still be trapped, there now was an exit for all of those who could see it. I returned to my body, and Tamashii also revived. I am told that around 10% or so of all damned souls either found a way back to Earth, reincarnated, or finally made it to an Afterlife so I was in trouble for awhile for creating an uproar. The hole, I am told, never got fixed but remained as an exit.

After three days of being absent then in a sleep-like state, Tamashii was alive again without a hitch, but I had a strange mark on my forehead resembling a moon and having the runes «月鬼» inside it. At the time, I had no idea what this meant, but over the next few months I figured it out. Like most women, I had a monthly cycle, but now I had a second cycle. I was eternal as before, and could no longer be killed. But after, I was only fully alive during the full moon and some holidays like Halloween, Easter, Christmas, and the Ghost Festival. Over the month otherwise, my body would likewise grow more solid as the quarter moon waxed towards a full moon, only to gradually become more like a ghost as it waned towards a new moon. With my symbols I could still harm other ghosts but not the living, I could still be seen but not be touched, and my sword could still technically hurt living things (but it didn't have its power until the moon was at least a quarter moon again). But more importantly, I couldn't touch *her* until I was back to normal. Would she still love me, knowing that I was a ghost?

TAMASHII

“I call this meeting to order,” I said. The Council members shook their heads, and Hinata's leader Lajila objected, “Tamashii Brahman, you do not have authority within this Council as Nevras has all but abdicated, and his wife Ambrosia also appears to have no interest in the position. In fact, it seems as though your cousin Morgana is next in line unless one of you decides to step up. Now sit in the guest's chair unless you plan to do that.” I thought about the times that I'd met Morgana and immediately said, “I have decided to swear to royal offices, in the sight of God and before all of you. When my grandparents leave the throne through accident, assassination, or old age, I vow to reign in their place, with the assistance of whatever spouse I choose. Unless I change my mind. Until such point, I will only attend Council meetings if I have a direct concern.” What? Morgana was an evil witch. Like I was giving the crown to her! I guess I’m glad her name wasn’t Nimue.

“Very well, then!” she said, “However, you still are not allowed to call the meeting to order. That's my job. So... do you actually have a direct concern? Because if not...” Hmph, treating me like a child. Didn't she know that at age four, I had already memorized *Robert's Rules of Order*? I told her, “As a matter of fact, I do have a concern. Our party was attempting to secure the Orihime Flute, when the artifact was seized by one Mariposa of the Kochou race. This action has impeded our quest, and we would probably like resolution to it, especially after our long boat trip here, in which time I was in Niraya for a few days as well.” Lajila smirked. She had heard enough about our travels from my grandparents to know that they were always a bit different from the rest of the population. After a few cases of someone's cow being stolen or alleged curses, having someone actually escape the Buddhist hell that nobody was supposed to be able to escape was a welcome change. “I make a motion to delay other business during this Council meeting for two weeks,” she proposed, “in favor of resolving this and only this issue during this meeting.” King Charis and Queen Victoria seconded. Since most of the Council had apparently been looking for any excuse to shorten the meeting, the vote carried unanimously. “Very well,” she said, “call the accused.” Jesus stood, a girl who looked like an older version of me. Jesus said, “I call Mariposa to witness for her actions.” And suddenly, there she was. At least, I thought it was her, she had grown taller and slightly leaner, and she appeared to have antennas on her head now. It hadn't been that long! Could she really have changed that much? She was... fabulous.

Mariposa looked around at the room, confused as to how she got from a forest a moment ago to a room filled with people. But before she could dwell on this, Jesus asked her, “Tell me, why did you take the Orihime Flute from these people?” The way she asked was strange. It wasn't that she was condemning her, as there was no judgement in her voice. But Jesus knew immediately that she had in fact done so, and wanted to give her a chance to admit her actions and her reasons. Mariposa obliged, “Our people have constantly been losing territory after the changes to the Council allowed more lands to be built into towns.” Jesus asked, “So Tamashii and her group was responsible for this?” Everyone in the room knew this wasn't the case, that the Council's failure to maintain zoning had in fact been to blame. She shook her head, “Of course not! But they interfered with my plans to take back our lands and invade a few extra lands nearby, so they deserve what they get!” The Council demanded she return the Orihime Flute, which was when I technically wanted to leave, but now that we'd started this zoning debate, that was out of the question. I guess if Estheriel wanted to destroy the universe or something, we would just have to wait until the Council had come to a decision, even if it only happened after everything was destroyed... Okay, maybe I’m being a bit overdramatic.

Everyone in the Council debated for a few hours on how to zone. Jesus believed that in the interest of fairness, any new towns should be 50 miles or more away from the nearest forest with and any industrial towns should also be this far from the ocean to protect places like Aquamundo from pollution. But although the Council often deferred to Jesus and his/her fair approaches, this particular issue needed each town to consider its own self-interest. The mayor of Ghobli couldn't abide this, since his town was surrounded by forests, and logging was part of the town industry. Goji was a coastal town and near enough to a desert that the second prohibition wouldn't serve their interests if it suddenly went from a quaint town with ghosts to a classical fishing village. Kirin was mostly helpless without access to both alpine forests and access to fish.

Finally, after spending the entire night on the verge of strangling one another, a solution was made. Of course, this solution was only arrived at after voting on and dismissing about four proposals. First, town size was to be limited horizontally to what it already was. Any additional building to a preexisting town could only take place vertically, either in terms of skyscrapers or in the building of underground cities. Since most humans didn't want the second one, only towns with large numbers of dwarves favored this approach. Second, new towns were only allowed if there was a population to support it. This was to prevent scores of unnecessary towns from springing up only to leave behind empty houses where nobody lived. Third, if a majority of houses in a town are empty, the town will reduce in size to just the houses needed, maintaining the current town borders. This meant that such houses got bulldozed and replaced with trees or

farmland. Fourth, all towns are organized around a single climate type. That is to say, if one region was mostly snow, and it suddenly switched to grassland (as had happened in Kushiyama), you'd be able to build one town in the snowfields (Kirin) and one in the grassland, and one in the mountain between them, but nothing outside of that.

They ultimately decided to make a policy that only adult trees are allowed to be removed, and each tree removed must have at least one replacement. By doing this, even towns that living too close to the forest were at least ensuring that the forest wasn't clear-cut to turn it into an urban center or something. This was also vague enough to allow for a great variety of town types. There were even moving machine towns!

While people could move to whatever town they wanted, most people preferred to pick a town to live in and build it up. Mom quoted some verse to me later, "*Imagine a small country with few people. They enjoy the labor of their hands and do not waste time inventing labor-saving machines. Since they dearly love their homes, they are not interested in travel. Although they have boats and carriages, they are rarely used. Although there may be weapons, nobody ever uses them. They are content with healthy food, pleased with simple clothing, satisfied in snug homes. People take pleasure in being with their families, spending weekends working in their gardens and delighting in the doings of the neighborhood. Although the next country is close enough that they can hear their roosters crowing and dogs barking, they are content to leave each other in peace*." I had no idea what she meant. There were all kinds of cool devices lately, and they made life so easy. And it seemed so fun to travel. But after this decision, tourists were rare, and people did seem to prefer to stay in their own towns and settle down.

As far as getting Rangers to manage these forests, that was voted down. Zoe managed to propose to the Council to use Druids instead, and this idea was well-received by Mariposa. By the time we actually left, it seemed like everything was settled. Which was good, because it meant that Mariposa was all too eager to hand us back the Flute.

AMBROSIA

We headed to Galaxia from the Council's island. While it was probably important to stop whatever plan Estheriel had for the world, now that we actually had the Orihime Flute back, I didn't feel like it right now. It was almost Valentine's Day, and I hadn't had a date with my man in quite awhile. I was kinda worried that Tamashii might be a hindrance. But she said that she was gonna try a play date with Portia. After her traumatic experience, she needed some time with a friend to cheer her up. And that would give us plenty of time uninterrupted to enjoy ourselves.

The others were planning various outings too. Zoe and Azrael, because they had traveled the world together, said they planned to just spend the time indoors and watch movies together while cuddling. Yazim Jianne and Selqui had spent much of their time together with experimentation of things that were blasphemous, such as training dolphins to deliver mail using waterproof capsules and a vacuum tube system. Why, if dolphins were meant to deliver mail, God would have given them wings like pigs had! Selqui wanted to have a sense of how regular girls lived, and they needed a break from science, she said. Yazim Jianne had looked a bit shocked, but after some arguing, they said they were going to "something called a shopping mall." She came back later with an ingenious dress that appeared to be made by Yazim Jianne himself, after they concluded that all of the dresses in the store lacked the ability to freely morph into a bikini, which was something a devoted swimmer like her required. Elias gave the day to Aqorm and Lilith to enjoy together, despite their protests, since he said he wanted to spend the whole day studying, and eat black bean noodles called *jajangmyeon*. I have no idea what those two did, as they wouldn't talk about it later. Something about it being almost ruined.

The holidays of the New Earth ended with Christmas and began with New Years, and every year in a twelve year cycle there was a different animal depicted. Nine years had passed since 7076 AD (Year of the Dragon) when we started our quest, and our quest had taken about a year and a half, but that time didn't count, because God had played tricks with time. So this year was now 7085 AD, and it was now the year of the Ox. This meant that Christmas celebrations started at Christmas Eve and continued up through Epiphany, but most people didn't even mention the new year until the official New Year,

making the celebration pretty long. In any case, right in the middle of this time frame was Valentine's Day on February 14th, also known as White and Black Day. As well as being a big day for dating, it was also a time to give white chocolates in response to declarations of love from previous years or eat the aforementioned *jajangmyeon* (a noodle dish with large amounts of black beans) if they were single. This day was also called the Day of the Lord, because there was an unsubstantiated rumor that Jesus had his Resurrection on this date rather than Easter (nobody could prove that though). Then there was Ash Wednesday, which always appeared 40 days (not counting about six Sundays) before Easter, and involved marking the forehead with ash. Easter celebrated the resurrection of Jesus among his believers, and renewal and spring among everyone else. This year, it would be April 5th , so Ash Wednesday would be 46 days before that, and 50 days after that was Pentecost. Pentecost was kinda cool though, as actual spiritual flames appeared suddenly and typically blocked up the streets. But only Christians celebrated some of these, while everyone celebrated Christmas, Easter, and Halloween.

Aside from that, we had a number of Asian festivals. We had Honensai (which wound up being largely a harvest festival involving a phallic object), Tanabata (where the estranged lovers Orihime and Hikoboshi meet for one night), and Ghost Festival (the Ghost Day of the Ghost Month where people made offerings to ghosts). We had Independence Day, celebrating independence by shooting off fireworks (but nobody still understood what it was independence from). We also had Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Christmas at their normal dates before the year began anew. Well, unless you counted the Year of Jubilee, Passover, and the Great Eclipse when the Sun, Moon, and Presence eclipsed (which actually only existed since this year because before that the Presence didn't appear in the sky, but I wiped everyone's mind to believe that we'd been celebrating this for centuries). We had a few too many holidays, to say the least, and while I was tempted to blow off this one, we were in desperate need of a break from getting in and out of a boat, on and off a dragon, talking to people, fighting critters, and all the stress that came with frequent travel. I needed time to just be with my beloved.

I wanted something simple, such as dinner and movie, just to spend time with him. Aside from Nevras's crossdressing, he was a pretty regular guy, so I got him all dolled up, curled his hair, tightened a corset so his Medium body was now able to fit into a Small sized dress, applied makeup and pads, and he slipped into a nice slinky pink dress that he'd kept around for such an occasion. I slipped on a short petticoat underneath, and he looked like Sakura Kinomoto of *Cardcaptor Sakura*, except for the fact that this dress only poofed out slightly due to its tightness. It was narrow-waisted, with matching pink boots with white tights extending just above the boot, pink shawl, and pink cap with white gloves, and red/white stripe ribbons extending from the cap, the shawl, and near the boot. I on the other hand had an easy change of clothing. You see...

A long time ago, Aqorm splashed mud on my dress (and on me), and I discovered that it had powerful runes enchanted to it, but nothing a decent wizard couldn't have made. But then when I saw how that ordinary fishing pole that could turn into any tool was actually made from Conception, and how light and flexible my brown dress was, it got me to thinking. What if my dress and boots were also the same material, and could become any clothing I wanted? I experimented with it, over the course of many dances and parties, and it turned out I was right! I couldn't make it into armor or anything, but I could turn my dress into a bikini or a bridal dress or a party dress. Since we were going to a trendy restaurant, not an upscale one, I decided the height of fashion would be to turn my dress into a leotard, tight, and legwarmer combo which was so popular in those 1980s movies. Since the 1980s were the height of fashion. Especially bodysuit/jeans.

When we entered the diner, people looked at us funny, but we paid them no mind. I ordered the porterhouse with a baked potato and some onion rings, and he ordered the salad since I insisted that a “proper lady cannot be seen gorging herself on bloody red meat, and we must always keep up appearances.” Awhile back we figured out that in addition to crossdressing, he kind of liked being dominated. I didn't like pushing too hard, but treating him like he suddenly wasn't allowed certain foods or drinks because they were “unladylike” seemed to turn him on. I was about to bite into my bloody juicy steak when a ringtone from his cellphone rang. He obviously had set his ringtones, and

Tamashii definitely got her snarky sense of humor from him, for it played Mr T's *Treat Your Mother Right*. "What's mine?" I asked. He laughed, "Try calling me." I giggled, when Rick Astley's *Never Gonna Give You Up* played. "Oh," he said, "Now, I wanna find out yours!" I protested, "Wait no, it's embarrassing!" But it was too late. It was N'Sync's *God Must Have Spent A Little More Time With You*. His mom rang again, and this time he sighed, and picked up, "I was just wondering if you and Ambrosia had any plans for Valentine's Day, because you know I was thinking..." He hung up. She always did stuff like this! She was sweet to me, and she loved him. But sometimes, with all of her money and political power, her sense of romance interfered with what we would have preferred. We might go to burger place or a ramen shop, or a diner like this one, but she felt like we couldn't have a good time unless we were treated to a five star restaurant. She meant well but as she kept calling, that funny ringtone quickly got annoying, and finally infuriating. Eventually, I flipped the table. Or tried to, it was a diner, and even with my great strength, this diner had dealt with the likes of ogres. The table was fairly firmly bolted to the ground. "Dammit," I said impotently. I grabbed my Console, and before I thought it through, I typed in, «**Leave this world**.» What could go wrong?

I intended for us to spend an actual date without interruptions. Instead, I forgot that my Console had a tiny problem of erasing me from existence. I could still see him at the diner, but I was like a ghost. I guess that's it then, I screwed up, and now I'll never see him again. "Oh c'mon, quit being over-dramatic, will you?" a voice behind me said. I turned to see the part of me that was God staring at me. "Why, God?" I asked, "Why can't anything I do with this Console actually work?" God explained, "You're trying to change reality. In order for anything to change, it needs to match what things are..." I had to accept how things were to change things? I couldn't hear anything more. She started poking me in the back. "As I was saying before you ignored me," God said, "your Console doesn't work because in the back of your mind, you're convinced that what you make isn't real. So it isn't." Ah, so my suspicion earlier was right. I handed this to God, "Can you fix things? What I really wanted was a quiet date with my husband, without any distractions." God nodded, "I'll take this off your hands until you're able to use it properly." God explained, "From now on, your fate is in your hands. You're outside his reality, but he might be able to remember you again." I dialed him, even though I was sure he wouldn't pick up. It looked like he almost answered the phone... And then static. My reality broke down. I noticed him, I looked up at him, but I wasn't sure he even saw me. He seemed to answer the phone, but we couldn't hear each other.

I tried to speak, but it felt like everything I said was covered with a thick static that made speech impossible. I might as well be speaking inside a tunnel with a ten-year-old cellphone surrounded by trees, while the other person was underground or something. I tried to speak anyway. "Nevras?" I asked, "can you hear me?" But the static persisted for a significant amount of time, as though what I said didn't actually matter. We couldn't understand each other, although I kept talking, telling him about how I was in another dimension, but if only he could hear me, I would rejoin him soon. I kept talking, yammering on and on *ad infinitum* using all sorts of clichés and filled the airspace with small talk. None of it seemed to reach his ears. Eventually, I pretty much just totally burst into tears, "**I only wanted to be with my husband for Valentine's Day! Is it so wrong to want to spend my time with the man I love?**" I looked around, and everyone in the restaurant was staring. I was back in the real world! But we had made a scene.

Nevras blushed, before calling over the chef, "Could... could you box this up for us?" The chef, who turned out to be an old romantic, despite his gruff appearance (it was a diner, after all), not only did just that, but asked if we wanted any dessert. There were loads of chocolate items, but I wasn't that big into chocolate, honestly. Nor could I handle much coffee, outside a tiramisu. It tastes like dirt, even if it is just ground!

Instead, we got a Yin Yang cake, with berries on top. The Yin Yang cake was an invention of the Great Sage Exceeding All Other Bakers, and was a layering of angel

food cake with devil food cake, normally. But as I announced my aversion to chocolate, he instead subbed that out with an demon food cake. A demon food cake was a different recipe than devil food cake, it was light and fluffy yet still more decadent than angel food cake. While devil food cake was flavored with chocolate, demon food cake was typically a sponge cake with ginger and peanut butter added into the mix. The icing of this cake swirled together with half coconut icing and half peanut icing, then they lined the whole thing with slivered nuts and berries. The whole thing was a mini-cake, which the baker refused to cut a slice but instead gave us the whole thing because it was art. We spent most of the night looking at this thing. An angel, a demon, and something wild. Then finally, we ate this thing before going to bed. It was so filling that we couldn't go directly to bed, though, but instead spent most of the night making out. To burn energy.

Then one thing led to another, and I was pulling off his panties while he gently unfastened my leotard and stockings. Nine years of being with him had changed my approach to lovemaking. Although he liked me to *act* dominant, he wasn't an outright masochist, and he did like me to be at least gentle enough to not walk bowlegged the next morning. We held each other tight, kissing each other before I gently slipped myself around his delicate cock. Real or not, I fondled his breasts. Just before he came, I pulled out, telling him that he'd been naughty, and we can't allow naughty people to come inside me, now can we? While I had been stripped down to nothing at all, I insisted that he remain almost fully clothed. Despite being outside me, he still enjoyed licking my cunt and sucking my breasts, but he looked deprived. Especially after I told him that it was my show, and he wasn't to do anything. But I had a treat for him, just for this Valentine's Day. Involving some toys... It's okay. I was gentle, I promise.

If all of this seems depraved, keep in mind that we almost lost each other, and I was willing to do anything to keep him from getting bored with me. He seemed to be okay with even vanilla sex, yet my heart hurt right now so the regular stuff probably wouldn't cut it. I needed to feel like he wanted me, so only the most perverted stuff for me. He sensed my doubt, and held me close to cheer me up. But it was difficult for me right now, so this took awhile. Hours passed, and Tamashii came back home. We scrambled to clean up all signs of what we did in here, but I definitely feel we had fun tonight!

PORTIA

A sort of static that pervaded reality made everything flicker for a few seconds, and Tamashii appeared to disappear for a little while. I suspected a time paradox. "Are you sure about this?" she asked. Tamashii had always been my friend, along with Sastra. But lately things had begun to change. I had some sexual feelings. They were premature, obviously, as I was only nine or so, but they were nudged a bit by the strange makeup of my self. I was a Seraphim, and until adulthood, my angelic and demonic selves would constantly be urging me in ways that I did not understand. In particular, my passions were more like someone twice my age, while my body wasn't developed enough yet.

I nodded. "Yes, I want to have a date with you. I want to know what it feels like to be with you as if we were a couple, not just as a friend." She got kind of quiet for a second. I could probably read her thoughts if I wanted, even with her psionic abilities blocking her mind from intrusion. But I didn't want to. Good or bad, I wanted to hear her say it.

After a long pause, she said, "Alright then. But I'm not very confident about this." Having spent years by her side, I knew what she meant. She had been moved rather suddenly from the first town she'd ever lived. She had lived on the outskirts, away from most friends her age, with only her family and the two of us to cheer her up.

Galaxia hadn't quite the shopping scene that Phoenix had, but it did have a mountain range nearby. On one of the biggest of these, someone had built a ski lodge, and I knew from my times with Tamashii that she loved all sorts of outdoor activities, as well as being an avid shopper. I thought that it might be fun to hang out with her there. I have no idea what possessed me to think this, since she had almost lost her life on Kushiyama's slopes. I suppose I wanted to teach her to ski safely, and heal some of those bad memories. After that we'd soak in the hot tub and just...

A Divine Edict appeared below our feet, a series of words and symbols carved in the circle by the hand of God. «*Portia, of the house of Michael, you are hereby commanded to*

return Tamashii no later than 9pm this day, and perform no sexual actions to this girl of nine, nor she to you, nor shall any skinny-dipping or other shenanigans ensue. You will, this day be allowed to kiss or cuddle, but nothing beyond that. Otherwise, you shall die.» I see. So God was protective of Ambrosia's daughter for some reason. Well, no matter, I guess I could live with those terms.

Teaching Tamashii to ski proved to be more frustrating than I thought. Tamashii had done skiing that time she almost broke her neck on Mount Tsukuyomi, but she'd blocked it, so I refreshed her memory. After an initial part where she goofed up when trying to stop, tangling her skis together, causing her to rush at full speed into some netting at the bottom of the hill, causing her to fall onto her back. After that though, her skiing was incredible, as she was fast at picking up most skills. So why was I frustrated? Well... once she learned the basics, instead of gradually building her skills, she wanted to push herself with a black diamond slope. When after barely making it back without any bruises wasn't enough, she decided that those poles were too much like training wheels, and ditched them, relying instead on her balance and her ability to lean correctly. Honestly, the more I looked at it, the more that it seemed to make sense, since a very large temptation was to try to use the poles to stop, and she could focus much more on her other skills. The problem, of course, was that she didn't try this on a green or even a blue slope. She was going down the same slope that she had trouble with!

I tried my best to tutor her, showing her how to use the hockey stop to slow herself down significantly. It was a very long process, because the slopes were steep and she was constantly trying to slow down, but for the most part she didn't really fall much anymore with my support. We made it to the bottom and took off our boots and skis in the lodge. I was fine, but her legs were a bruised mess. I wrapped her legs.

For the next few hours we soaked in the tub, while I set to work healing. Healing was difficult in bubbling water, but gradually those bruises receded. I wanted to touch her body pretty badly, but it seemed like God would kill me right away if I tried that and I probably would get the same treatment again from Ambrosia, so I left her alone for now. She could tell that I was interested though, when she started kissing me. 8:30 rolled around, and I hauled her back to the hotel, with her grabbing my waist tightly as I flew. I never forgot those feelings. Perhaps when we were older, we'd act on them, but for today, it was enough. At age nine, it was a bit too early to do anything besides kiss or hug.

AQORM

An angel, a demon, and something wild. For some reason, that image stuck in my head. Also, I was really feeling hungry for cake, all of a sudden. In any case, we could worry about eating later. I'd agreed to a six mile hike today, each way through forests and mountains, because apparently Lilith had heard about some great restaurant on top of a mountain directly above a ski lodge. It was vaguely a tourist location, but the chef kept this five star restaurant difficult to access. You had to shell out large amounts of money to take a dragon or dirigible up to the top, or you had to be extremely agile and in peak physical shape. While this was not a problem for elves and demons, humans typically got wiped out well before they made it up there. The ski lift got most of the way, though.

On the other hand, both of us were able to jump from tree to tree, so we made it there in a few hours thanks to some awesome parkour. The view was incredible! I could see down to Galaxia from this mountaintop, I could see deer near the alpine forests, and I could even see the little moguls of snow get run over by the skiers on the slope. The lift carried people up to about 100 yards from the top, too far for them to get to us given their skis and the slope, but not too far for us to climb down to them. Perhaps after dinner, we'd pelt a few of them with snowballs for fun, or maybe do some skiing on our own. What a nice little resort community this was! Why, it was perfect! I bet even a stick in the mud like Elias would enjoy this little mountain village.

Our date on the other hand, was about to be ruined. Michael had apparently seen us from afar. He descended suddenly to our location, wings unfurled, trailing a beam of light behind him. "I believe that girl belongs to me, Aqorm! I have her child." I protested, "No way! I'm married to Lilith, and you can't have her! Besides, we're on a date right now!" Michael smiled, but I wasn't sure it was all that pleasant, "So, you want

a perfect Valentine's Day? With hearts and flowers and conversation candies? A *perfect* date?" I nodded, "Of course I do! Except those conversation heart things are made of bone meal or something..." I grimaced, then shrugged, "Sure, if you want to help me have the perfect Valentine's Day, I'm glad to accept!" What? It seemed good at the time.

I expected Michael to use his Script, saying, "***Perfect Fantasy - Object: Chocolate Box***" or something, but instead he simply handed me a heart-shaped box. I took it as I munched on a chocolate, dreaming that this would help my date become perfect. It did in a manner of speaking, but I was trapped in a dream for several days by my reckoning. I'm sure it was probably not the same in real time, while Michael tried to steal my date.

In this dream, I was spending my date in this town, not with Lilith but with Elias. Now, some part of me knew that this was not real, just as some part of me could hear Lilith's concerned voice in the background screaming, "*Aqorm! Wake up! Get away Michael, and stop meddling! You heard me, go back home*!" I heard someone fly away. Then my memories faded, and this too faded into the background.

The town was apparently closed off from the world by a wall of snow and ice. The view looked beautiful from the top but when I tried to leave, this barrier suddenly appeared, and Elias led me away, saying, "Come dear, we still haven't finished our date." Not that it was so terrible a place that I immediately had to leave.

In Valentine Village, as I had taken to calling it, since it looked like a Christmas Village, only everything was decorated with garish pink hearts and red streamers, all of the townspeople were so sweet and so in love with other townspeople. While the outside was a wall of ice, everything within appeared to be spring weather. There was no suffering of any kind, no fear, no despair, no want or need. It was perfect. The trees all had carvings in them like «R+H 4Eva» or «Charity and Grace, Love Wins!» and Elias kept trying to convince me to carve my name. But something seemed wrong with that.

As far as days went, each day I spent slightly differently. I got up, Elias said good morning to me, and we had an omelet with spinach and cheese, Belgian waffle with fresh fruit, blueberry pancakes, or sausage gravy and biscuits. Some days, I even skipped the fancy breakfast and just had cereal which was may choice from several containers where I could scoop out Harvest O's, Corn or Wheat Nets, Generic Granola, or The Oatmeal. Each day wasn't exactly the same, but had minor differences, just like chocolates in a batch were different. Some days we skied downhill, others we hiked around, others we rode in a horse-drawn sleigh, still others we built a snowman. In the evening, activities varied from going out to dinner, to watching projection movies while sitting outside, to playing games in the hotel, and so on. It wasn't some fixed idea of perfection, as I craved variety in my life, there were at least different flavors of day, although some of them were similar just like real chocolates. You always get more caramels than you like.

I had a dim memory of the days before in this dream world, but my memories of Lilith, of our quest, and of my goals as a musician were lost. I felt something was missing, but much like someone reincarnated, the life before was cruelly lost and I couldn't even tell why this perfect world was bothering me. Every day that this dream lasted, I would pull one chocolate from the box and munch on it while sleeping, and our vacation would advance one day. Only, something went wrong. There were about 30 chocolates in this box wrapped in silver paper, but on chocolate piece 24, day 24 started to repeat. I just couldn't stand any more chocolate...

Day 24, unlike the others had no variety, because I was stuck on the same chocolate. So I got up, only to try to sleep through the day. I was tired of being here, after all. But at about 11am, Elias pulled me out of bed despite my protests. Despite trying to get back to sleep. "You can't sleep away your life!" he insisted each day. And yet, after seeing most of what this town offered, I was determined to try this, even though it added nothing to the day to do this. He'd offer me a nice crab omelet, but I'd reject it for a tiny bit of fruit. The same happened for lunch, when we were having Kobe burgers on buckwheat buns. And for dinner, I turned down lobster with about a pound of caviar. I refused to ski, I refused to go to any movies, I just sat in my room and read. Even Elias, lover of books that he was, felt like something was wrong with this sort of reading. He tried to cheer me up but I was just not feeling it. And then the day refused to move forward. I did this again. And again. Eventually, I finished my first book, so I found another on the

shelf. I'd probably read the entire library soon and then repeat. It was like what happened in the Bible, God said, “You can eat from any of these fruits except the one that causes pain and suffering or whatever,” and they wanted the one that caused pain and suffering. At least, I think that's what the Bible said about it. In any case, in a world where I had choices on how to spend my day, ultimately it was the weight of these choices that put me into a black funk. What if I made a bad choice?

Only, day 25 came anyway. I woke up, and Lilith was in my bead beside me, having eaten the 25th chocolate herself I guess. Despite us supposedly dating in this dream world, Elias always respected my privacy and let me have my own bed rather than sleep together with me. Which was probably for the best, as most evenings I tended to finger myself in a vain attempt to get aroused. It never worked. Despite things being “perfect” I had a distinct feeling of anhedonia, where every day was wonderful, but nothing really approached a state of happiness. This day, however, someone was sleeping in my bed. And it felt nice. In fact, I daresay it felt... just right. Not perfect. But what I wanted.

I felt arms holding my waist, I felt breasts touching my back, and I felt legs wrapped around my thighs. Then I felt the familiar pressure of Lilith's tail coiling inside me. “Ahh-aaaaahhh~!” I moaned. My eyes opened. “Hey there!” she said, “Let's ditch Elias, and finish our date.” For the next five days, it wasn't perfect, it was messy, but it was ours. We hung out at the lodge, but we tried to make the most of our time there, questioning the things that were perfect about this snowy Valentine Village. Elias decided to let me do what I wanted with her after seeing how happy I was, especially after seeing me depressed from about 24 days with him. There were still repetitive aspects, since we were stuck in another time, but it's like all life, you know that things are sometimes gonna be awkward or slow, but you kinda live through it.

Our sleeping selves finally finished off those thirty pieces of silver (the chocolates were covered in silver wrapping), and we woke up about a month later in dream time, and only a few hours later in actual time. The guests looked at us funny for sleeping during our date, and the chef was annoyed because he thought he might have to keep the restaurant open. I never wanted a perfect date again. Cheesy, ruined, whatever, just not perfect. We finished our dinner, and rolled down the mountain, turning into giant snowballs that knocked over other skiers. I figured we'd suffocate inside these things, but the rough soil at the bottom cracked the snowballs like an egg. We walked the rest of the way to Galaxia to rejoin the others.

JESUS

Behold humans, you thought it was Michael who delivered this Valentine's Day chocolate box. But it was I, Jesus! You have heard me say, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” But having seen generations of Christians and Jews trying to live up to perfectionism, let me clarify. God is neither completely omnipotent (for he limits his power), nor omniscient (for the nature of free will and the infinite number of parallel branches of reality created by different decisions renders this ability meaningless), nor omnibenevolent (for in order to be truly good, one must be in accord with the Tao which contains good and evil), nor even omnipresent (for to be everywhere is to be fixed nowhere). But God is perfect in two regards, God is perfectly in the same image as humans and God is perfectly able to love us (as opposed to being able to love us for being perfect). I gave this gift to Michael, who gave it to Aqorm, in order to show her the value of imperfection. Michael simply cooperated because it allowed him to pay Lilith back for neglecting Portia and himself so long.

CHAPTER 18

In which the Universe Egg is opened by whistling on a flute.

BAHAMUT

Ambrosia and her family all rode on my back again. I had gotten used to their weight, and it was refreshing to get out of my cave, now and then, but I had been in the middle of a nap when they called me this time. Oh well, no matter. They typically were gone for periods of time after I dropped them off, and aside from the angel and the demon (who

never called me), I would have plenty of time after they were dead to catch up on my sleep. Besides, I had taken a dragon-nap in the nine years that they had not been doing any major quests, and they had for the most part resorted to boats and teleportation pads to get about. Now that we were headed to what could be the end of all of their quests, I felt honored to be part of their journey. These humans were pretty interesting.

I had met Ambrosia near the end of her original journey, just before she met Lilith. Being a dragon, I sometimes remembered the ripples of time, so I knew of one point where Nevras broke up with her, and he had a long chat with me before turning around and going back tho her. But that reality didn't happen. Instead, she decided to extend her quest, dragging me along to places in an obvious effort to stall and spend more time with her man. It didn't bother me though, because I was willing to keep a secret.

Ambrosia was an oddity, despite the time I had spent with her an her friends. She seemed to be simultaneously moody and very emotionally restrained. She seemed to lose the ability to shut away her feelings though, once she had the Tao ability. Ambrosia seemed frightened of her own emotions, but using her powers was slowly getting her used to how such things felt. The Tao ability was so sensitive to her mood that unless she was perfectly in balance, it would not work. I couldn't imagine what it was like to have that sort of burden, where the slightest bit of sadness could destroy you. But she seemed adjusted now, and was friendly to her daughter and more intimate with her husband, in a way I had not seen for years. She had returned this power before, but I sincerely hoped she kept this power after this quest was over. Deadpan Ambrosia was calmer, but this Ambrosia seemed to be a sweeter person. She seemed more honest somehow.

All of this I thought as we flew toward what Ambrosia called the Universe Egg. But after I got there, I no longer thought about such things. I no longer thought about anything, for upon the Egg were fixated all of thoughts. You see, the object was pretty hard to ignore. It was starkly beautiful and yet conveyed a sense of *wrongness*.

The Universe Egg was noticed over the course of the last nine years (although many people believed the Presence had always been there) along with other strange new astronomical developments, such as real stars, the Presence, and the change of the shape of Earth. It floated at seeming random in the sky, far nearer than the sun, the moon, or the Presence and just above the level where most birds could reach it. Which was probably for the best, as it seemed as though the Egg was a perpetual source of light and of several types of energy. This should be impossible, since the very laws of conventional science stated that something that steadily gave off energy should also gradually lose it at the same rate. While the Egg did appear black enough to absorb light, it also constantly shimmered with as much light as a miniature sun. Even more astonishing was the sort of light that it gave off, as well as how it transmitted this. It gave off warmth but not heat. That is to say that on this cold day buffeted by winds and high altitude it was about as warm near the Egg as a spring day would be, and yet the light was not intense enough to hurt the eyes, despite glowing for miles around itself. Rather than ultraviolet light, it scattered light in the visible spectrum, spinning it in spirals, sine waves, and other interesting patterns while the center appeared as contrast in black as clouds passed around it. The Egg also proved to be its own reflection, casting an negative afterimage, so we originally saw a perfectly white Egg, and I flew toward that only to find that this one was not solid. We had seen it before, but much of what they saw and described to you, and what I saw are completely different. Human eyes cannot see certain shades of black or red, so the Egg probably looked white to them. And humans are nearsighted, so they probably couldn't see the squirming forms just inside the shell. It must be nice to have such blissful ignorance, but as a dragon, despite being a legendary one, I was terrified. This thing should *not* exist.

Just outside the Egg, I noticed the barrier from before. Or rather, I couldn't so much see it as I could see the way the air reacted around it, in the same way that a fire that burns cleanly enough creates motes of heat that cast shadows and create ripples but does not show up directly to human eyes. Until we attacked it, until we crashed into it, it was so perfectly transparent that even my eyes couldn't tell where it was.

“We're here,” I announced to Ambrosia, “You should probably play that Orihime Flute now.” It looked like she hadn't had many lessons. If the Orihime Flute had the ability to

disrupt barriers, then it shouldn't matter what song she played, so we basically had her play F7, G, Em, Am in succession a few times. Then she followed it with a few other notes. After some practice, her hands made the motions, but she couldn't figure out how to how to make sound. Her palm was covering the holes. Aqorm was losing patience, “You're hopeless! Let me do it!” Nevras pushed her away, a dangerous thing to do on my back. “Here,” he adjusted her hands, “you were just covering it.” He held her tight while he showed her how to move her fingers better, and I could tell she was blushing.

It was awkward for her, but now she made a sound. She fingered through the notes slowly, stumbling a bit, and occasionally playing a wrong note. Even though she was obviously bad at this, I told her to keep playing. A steady and persistent tune was more important than playing any specific song, playing quickly, or even playing well. The barrier was wavering, and it would do so the more she played. Ironically, the more she played, the more visible and solid it looked. The translucent barrier became opaque, and then coated the Egg like an outer shell. The iridescent color shimmered and changed, now appearing as solid as glass. Was she doing the wrong thing?

Still she played. At this point, she didn't know what else to do. As she played more, she was beginning to have fun and sounded like she was getting better at it. And then something happened. As I said, the barrier was as rigid as glass. But glass has a way of becoming brittle. The barrier shattered, with much the same sound as glass.

In the inside of the barrier, falling was no longer an issue. I was no longer needed as the group began to float freely, trying to organize their movements by making swimming motions. But I could tell they weren't getting anywhere. I reverted to my human form, a gigai with onyx hair and green eyes. And then stood upright in the air. “How did you do that?” the others asked. “It's easy,” explained. I would have thought everyone understood subjective attraction, but apparently it wasn't as commonplace where one travels by foot. “You just try to focus on thinking about solid ground, and it makes you walk as if there's ground,” I said as I walked on. While most of the others got this, Yazim Jianne allowed negative thoughts to intrude. He stood upright, but he was gradually beginning to sink into the surface. “Hold him!” I said to Selqui nearby, “Don't let him fall!” Selqui grabbed him, and held him tight, carrying him as she walked along.

In any case, one way or another, all of us made our way to the Egg in the center. We touched it simultaneously (agreeing silently that either we all made it in, or we all died), and if had a sort of sensation that was felt more than touched, almost like touching water in a dream that one is about to wake from. I would call the liquid sticky, but while its texture was similar to tar or honey, it did not appear to bond with solid objects. I cringed, and pulled my hand back. My hand exited the viscous black fluid with no ill effects, besides a sort of horror that strongly urged me never to touch it again. I pushed that aside, though my body was screaming at me, and told the others, “Relax, it should be safe to enter.” They didn’t want to either, but we managed.

The inside of the egg was a visceral sensation, to say the least. That outer barrier could best be compared to a shell, while the black substance was like amniotic fluid (of a some sort of fertile mutant chicken). Closing our eyes and holding our breath, all of us walked through the heavy layer of this stuff, not opening them until the creepy sensation passed. A thinner layer lay beyond it, and our group was drenched in blood. The laws of attraction inside this Egg appeared to arc around the edges, so we were able to stand upright without thinking about it, but the blood ran along the ceiling to the other end of the Egg. We stood on a mix of skin and below that was probably muscle and tendon, followed by bones, there were bridges of bones and rivers of blood, and every now and then we would see a face or a random organ spliced together. It was an almost cancerous-looking mass of assorted parts. It was interesting to look at, until I saw muscles *flex*.

The area inside the Egg was roughly 50 times the area outside of it, massive enough as it was that it was about 500 ft tall and its width was on average about half that, while the inside was nearly a mile wide just in radius. It was surreal to see a “sky” like this tinged with layers of red and black, which intermittently rained buckets of blood that collected in lakes and rivers. In addition to terrain literally made from organs, in addition to a deep gorge between these chained-together islands which emptied into a pit of

miasma, there were *things* here. The inside of the Egg appeared to be involved somehow in the creation of this world, so around fragments of anatomy from multiple living creatures there appeared to be component parts of such creations as souls, shadows, or the origins of atoms. I saw everything from genius loci to non-Newtonian fluids and liquid crystal to horrors of half-formed fetus and half-conceived ideas. I suspected it would get worse, the further we ventured within. As I was their ride home, and told them I would wait here. It had nothing to do with anything I saw inside the Egg. Nothing at all...

CHAPTER 19

In which valkyries are fought inside the creepiest dungeon ever.

NEVRAS

Inside the Egg, we wandered about for some time. The inside was divided by four distinct floors, divided by switchbacks, caves, and finally a staircase at the end of each. The islands of flesh and blood and bone extended for so long that sometimes we walked down a path, and it seemed like it was going somewhere, only to find out in fact that the island just hung suspended in space or led to a walled-off section. Worse, we often ran right into creatures. It was so strange seeing creatures again. For some reason, they had been scarce lately outside of dungeons. Maybe God was overprotective of Tamashii.

The amethyst dragons, we at least knew what to expect, even though they were very powerful, more so even than gold dragons. That same old thing, avoid the tail, the teeth, the claws, and the breath. I used my Dragon Roar ability, aware that each time, I had to rest a bit, because the strain of the technique hurt me. When I was older, I'd have heart trouble. The Brides of Hell were a bit more dangerous, as their arrows were fully strong enough to penetrate our shields, and I shudder to think how powerful they were be against us without them. We would probably wind up looking like we'd been hit by a rail-gun. It was only thanks to Yazim Jianne's quick thinking, using a *shikigami* to impersonate us, and then using several illusions to get them to attack each other that we made it through. Elias took care of some giant oozes using industrial strength soaps to break apart their cell walls. And Azrael quickly dismissed a group of lich masters.

It would be tempting to say that we could deal with any enemy now. But to tell the truth, these creatures were incredibly strong and we constantly worried about running out of steam and getting gobbled up, ambushed by archers, or some other colorful way to die. And I wasn't sure how well God could Reset things here. This was a strange place.

Despite everything, we did manage to make it through this area, but the worst opponents we managed to encounter were yet to come. Between getting terribly lost and fighting other critters, there were valkyrie scattered around the area. These were beautiful women with plate armor, loose skirts, metal boots, and funny helmets with a feather design. They were predominantly armed with spears and shields and they were able to fly, not with wings but by floating in midair. They fanned out in elaborate formations to try to get the jump on us. Sometimes they appeared alone, sometimes they were in small groups in three or four, and sometimes they were a whole unit of flying troops. The valkyrie had petty magic, which mostly involved blessing and protection, small elemental blasts, and some healing effects. But more problematic was their their armor had the ability to deflect all thaumaturgy (including Azrael's Solid Spells) back at its caster. Zoe cast her Fire spell, only to slightly scald her forehead creating a small ashy spot. We had an extended fight against these women, and I had to do quite a bit of the work. Lilith and Michael were some help as her demonic powers and his Script weren't technically thaumaturgy, but they were mostly taken down by martial prowess. They fought to the last woman, and we repeatedly had our healers gulp down restorative potions after spending most if not all of their mystic power keeping all of us healthy and alive.

It was exhausting, and most of us were hungry from our exercise. We had nothing to eat or drink except what we brought, so every effort was that much harder. The terrain made it feel like a vast wilderness, yet we were not tempted to eat or drink anything, since the water was blood and the only food was the walls and floor of human and animal flesh. And so, most of us suffered hunger and thirst within this chamber.

When the last valkyrie was finally stabbed, decapitated, or otherwise mutilated (for they would not quite for any but the most lethal wounds), we believed that the worst was finally over for our travels through this nightmarish non-Euclidean terrain. How wrong we were! We had made it through most of the third floor, gradually becoming used to the high-level creatures to the point where we could finish them off without a thought. I was worried that all of this death and destruction might do something to us later. Possibly we might become shell-shocked. Or worse, we might not be affected at all... Yet we had no time to think on these things, as a large man with a stern countenance stared at us with one eye. I remembered him! Santa? This was Odin! In addition to the terrifying thought of fighting such a strong being, I was filled with the notion that come Christmas Day, many children would be extremely disappointed. Not even coal in their stockings!

Unlike his valkyries, Odin wasn't immune to magic. He was frighteningly tough though, and he appeared to quickly heal from any wounds. Worse, he appeared able to change his immunity and weakness with regard to the elements. At one point, fire hurt him, at another only lightning caused pain and fire tickled him, and still another time he was only weak to the cold. We threw all sorts of things at him, but I remember Belial being slightly easier to damage. “I'm going to have to use the Sword of Sorrow, guys,” said Zoe. She disliked using her sword, since while it was very effective at bringing back the dead, it could also kill with a touch anything living or undead (it was worthless against golems though). Rushing forward, she swung the sword using her shoulders and pivoting her hips. A small yet jagged slash formed across his chest. “Hah, you think that wee little sword would do naught against me? Why, nothing could be further from the tru... ***Egad***! What have you done?!?” he said, noticing that unlike the other wounds, it appeared to rapidly be becoming necrotic rather than healing. “Even so, I shall return to life on the first new moon of the next solstice...” he said. Azrael shook her head, “I won't allow that.” She swung her sword with all her might, making another larger slash that overlapped the first. Azrael's Eternal Moon was not quite as sure of killing as the Sword of Sorrow, especially with her... condition now, but it was effective in making sure that things stayed dead. His body began to glow gold, and started to slowly turn to stardust. There were things that the Eternal Moon probably by definition couldn't destroy, such as Saints, God, and some rare beings like the Tatarimokke but usually...

But with immortals like Odin, there was an added wrinkle. Even though the sword could kill them and make them stay dead, they couldn't fully die until they passed on their Domain. That is to say, an immortal remained immortal until he or she gave what they represented up to someone else. He couldn't revive, but neither could he die. And so, I saw the revenant of Odin harpoon me and drag me towards him by the leg. The lance wasn't real enough to seriously hurt me, but it was enough to bring me right to him. “You seem like a decent person,” he said to me, “I'm passing this to you.” And then he touched me, and my hand had a mark resembling a snowflake, and my body was filled with the Spirit of Christmas. I knew things that I shouldn't know, like how to command the remaining armies of valkyrie, how to give all children in the world presents in one night (and trust me, it's a complicated process), and how to pass on my immortality to someone else. This I resolved to do immediately when this was over, to Frigg, Odin's wife.

BRUNHILDE

I had served Estheriel for a great deal of time, despite her confusing relationship with her guy (who seemed to simultaneously be an official marriage, and an affair thanks to Odin/Odr being the same person). The valkyries and I knew this to be the case, but Frigg in all of her knowledge was kept blissfully ignorant of her husband's dual existence.

I had carried the dead for her, I had cheered her up after she found some sort of cursed Ring that traumatized her. I had even assisted her in battles. But lately, she wasn't acting like herself. Well, that was an understatement anyway. Like Odin, Freya or should I call her Estheriel had no fixed form. As an immortal, she was all woman, but as an angel, Estheriel was an androgynous male. As Freya, she was a goddess of war, death, love, sex, beauty, fertility, and gold but as Estheriel (he?) was responsible for vengeance, justice, and healing, oddly enough. To say that she wasn't herself was probably accurate no matter what happened. But I guess I could say she was even *more* unlike herself.

In any case, Estheriel asked me to send my valkyries to guard this place, while business at its center was resolved. Apparently, there was some sort of secret to what this Egg was. I didn't ask questions, because my duty was to follow her orders. "I swear by God and all that is holy, I will defend this place from attack, and if I fail to do so, I will defend you, my lady Freya." It looked like she remembered something unpleasant, because she cringed at my words, before snapping at me. "I will hold you to that promise! You will never be allowed to betray me, and live! Dearest husband, go with them, and be sure they succeed." Odin nodded, and he too went to defend

All of this happened but a little while ago, and I had waited here since then. I indeed met with trouble, and so, drawing a valknut on the ground, I cried out, "Come forth, my valkyries!" Odd, the valknut was a sacred oath that must be obeyed. As long as they were alive they should come. These people, they were quite fearsome if they could defeat my entire squadron. Ah, no matter, Odin would still be able to defeat them. And so, I called him forth. "He's not coming," said the guy that the others would later call Nevras. He showed me his hand, patterned with a snowflake on his palm. He was the new Spirit of Christmas. And that meant... Odin was dead. Freya would be pissed...

It also meant that as much as I might want to take revenge, this Nevras was now the acting leader of the valkyrie. I had to respect the chain of command. "General," I said to him, "I request permission to retreat." He shrugged, and then waved me off.

"What..." she glared at me, "what are you doing back here? I told you that if you retreated from battle, I would kill..." I explained, "I had no choice! Someone has taken the Domain that Odin has. I can't defy them!" Her face fell, "They **killed** my husband? I'll make them pay..." Estheriel drew her sword, and a fire filled her eyes.

CHAPTER 20

In which Ambrosia talks to herself.

AMBROSIA

I hated this place and its yucky landscape. The earth was skin, water was blood, and the bridges that joined the islands were muscle and bones. Having defeated that Odin guy, Brunhilde, and all of her servants, we were heading to a fairly safe area. A lull, if you will, before we met Estheriel. I certainly hoped we had fought enough monsters...

Nevras and Tamashii wandered ahead with the others, but I was a bit distracted. When I noticed how far ahead they were, I called out faintly, "Wait up guys..." But my train of thought was interrupted by a beautiful yet curvaceous woman. Me, of course!

"Now arms, however beautiful, are instruments of evil omen, hateful, it may be said, to all creatures," a voice from seemingly nowhere announced. But I knew that voice. That was my evil double, here to harass me again. And here I thought she'd learned to behave when I mastered the Tao. "Ahahahaha," her voice echoed, "You? Master the Tao? Don't insult me. The Tao is not something humans can master, only work with." Apparently, she could read my mind, being me and all. I was cuter than her, though, so there.

I'd had enough. I didn't need to take this abusive talk, I'd walk away. That'd show her. And yet, when I tried, I discovered, "I can't move! But why?" "Ahahahaha," she mocked me again, "Where are you heading in a rush? I think it's time we had a chat, don't you, Ambrosia?" Fine, you win. I mean, I do. I mean... never mind. Someone won.

But she wasn't done with me. Said she, "But first, a test of your power. *Beast Summon*!" I don't remember having the ability to summon creatures so I've very certain that she shouldn't be able to either, but looking around, I had my answer. The area was not the skin and blood terrain that I had been currently in, but an area of darkness and nightmarish images. It was the Black Bug Room of legend. Everyone has their own Black Bug Room. Obviously, this was inside my head, so it was her show right now.

The summoned thing in question was a horrific black segmented slug thingy. I tried to use my Crests and then my Tao, but of course, this was inside of her vision for me, so I couldn't move without her permission. Nope to Crests, no thanks to the Tao since she was part of it, so it was just weapons. My fishing pole bounced off, so I pulled out my First Iron dagger, and slashed it it. It sliced apart, only to kinda squish itself together. It

was a tough punk, alright, but I was tougher. I slashed faster, cutting it into meaty chunks. Years of learning to cook for family had helped with my skill in knives, so I made short work of it. Only... it didn't stay that way. No matter what I tried, it kept getting itself back together. "Why isn't it dying?" I asked. Frustrated, I put all of my energy into killing it off, screaming the words, "You stupid monster! I'll kill you!" And the beast was done. But something was different about me.

"What... just happened?" I asked. My voice sounded different, for one. I looked at my nails. They were longer and kinda discolored, as if I hadn't properly managed them, which was weird since I always kept my nails trimmed and cleaned. I wanted to distance myself from my beggar past, after all. My hair also felt a bit messy. My hair! As I looked it it, my hair was more like Evil Ambrosia's. Or that of Tamashii, who apparently had inherited from the other side of me. While my hair was normally kind of like a blueberry, hers was more like a plum, a deep shade of purple. Even my clothes seemed to have undergone a more military makeover. I looked like *her*. Maybe she was cuter?

She explained, "Every time you fight, you become closer to me... and them. A monster..." I thought of all the fighting I had done during my quest. Hell, all the fighting that I had done in this area! "I'm not a monster!" I protested, then second-guessed myself, "Am I?" She echoed my suspicion with her voice in my head.

She said, "It's up to you. Human beings can be anything, from like an angel to a demon. I will help you. I will show you your futures." I guess, my other self decided for my own good (or something) to show me something. Nevras, Tamashii, and the others were standing at my side once again, facing Estheriel. She zapped all of us with a bolt of lightning, and I heard myself scream. And then the vision reset, and this time, I was the one there facing all the others of my current team. My body moved on its own, as I watched myself brutally kill my friends and comrades. "What... what just happened?" I gasped. The other me explained, "These are possible futures, the first will happen if you fail, or course. And the second..." She paused for effect.

"I'm not telling," she said, laughing again as she slowly faded away. What a punk. I really hate her... ummm, me. I don't know what would cause that other future... but I do know I have to stop Estheriel's plans. To me, carrying out quests gives me sense of purpose. But I remembered Elias telling us all about Henry Ford, and how he built a huge car factory, only to regret what he had created and buy a town to keep in the past.

NEVRAS

For some reason, Ambrosia took quite a long time to catch up with us. She finally arrived about 20 minutes later, after the others behind her all came. I guess she got distracted? In any case, unlike before where we just assumed Belial was evil, and went right ahead with defeating him, we actually bothered to ask Estheriel a series of questions about who he (she?) was, and what the angel's motivations were. I found out some backstory, such as that Estheriel had originally tried to help humans, that God had apparently been indifferent when the Council fell (I was annoyed at this one too, but you don't see me trying to redo the entire universe), and other facts. Eventually, I wasn't sure what else to talk about. Tamashii had long since used her psionic powers to manifest a handheld video game console (it was a bright pink rectangle with white buttons on the top and front), and was playing some game she dreamed up on the spot. It appeared to be an rpg involving heavy platform elements and which contained princesses. I kinda wanted to play, so I asked her about it. She brandished the small pink device.

"Oh this?" she replied, "This is *Super Sparkle Princess Saga*. I invented it after playing some old games using the Crystal Mirror and a Universal Gamepad (which to be honest, looked a bit like the Logitech F310 Gamepad). Basically, these two princesses meet this other girl who's like a bounty hunter and stuff, after their man has been kidnapped," she explained plot points then extremely complex controls, "You know, simple." Amazingly, it was, with the controls being kinda like that *Kingdom Hearts* game, only it had a bunch of girls instead and a lot of them had ranged weapons.

The game seemed to place a great deal of emphasis on fashion. Some of the outfits let you breathe underwater or withstand temperature. And as you went to towns, you could also make money doing fashion events. It also had farming and fishing sidequests.

I figured the controls out just in time to notice Ambrosia returning, and to hide the game. She wouldn't take it from Tamashii. Instead, she'd likely forget her whole quest, and we'd all be playing games in front of this angel.

CHAPTER 21

Götterdämmerung. In which Ambrosia faces Estheriel and one or both will prevail.

ZOE

Ambrosia arrived just in time for Estheriel to be completely impatient. She started to rant like a typical villain, "So, you've come to stop me. But are your intentions as noble as God would have you believe? Ponder this for a minute. Every day, an innocent life is ended, because a human makes a wrong choice. Don't you think we, as angels should act?" Ambrosia said, "I don't disagree. There certainly is a lot of cruelty. But such people have gotta be punished, usually by the crimes themselves. You know, poetic justice, and all that." Estheriel laughed, "Have you ever seen such justice happen? I've seen few real cases. In your own life, who saved you from the street? Who helped you?"

Ambrosia admitted, "I had to do it myself. Well, aside from that one guy who gave me money. Later, Nevras helped a bit, but originally it was just starting on this quest that improved my lot. Couldn't other people help themselves in the same way?" Estheriel shook their head dubiously, "Humans are so quick to blame others for their fortune, never taking true control over their lives. They quickly blame fate if things go wrong with them. Even if they should come to realize their failings, they wallow in despair instead of fixing things. Wouldn't it be better if someone did something for them instead?"

Ambrosia looked much like if someone had just explained socialism to her. She scowled, "I'm sure your intentions are okay. But if one day you want humans to do one thing, and another day, something completely different, what's to stop them from dancing to your tune?" Estheriel explained, "I would not control them. Think of it, all humans stripped of everything but love!" Earlier, Aqorm had told me a story of how Michael had tried to curse her by placing her into a perfect Valentine world. She quickly realized that far from being in love, her feelings were closer to wanting to die, until Lilith showed up.

With that in mind, I was about to tell Ambrosia not to take Estheriel up on this offer, but apparently she already disliked it, because she said, "Then, I need to stop you, since if everyone is in perfect love, people will try to hit on me. And I can't stand jerks that bother me about romance. Only Nevras can do that." Everyone in the room sighed.

"It appears we cannot agree on this," said Estheriel, "Very well, I will defeat you and complete the Universe Egg." And suddenly there was a heavenly host. We hadn't fought many angels besides Michael, but they were collectively at least as challenging as he was. They had use of the Script, so they could do things like say, "***Summon Object: Giant Boulder, 350 lb,***" and suddenly we had to move out of the way. Michael countered them with Script as well, "***Antimatter Hole: Radius - 30 ft***." This went back and forth with them playing word games with each other, and the entire thing feeling like an extended session of Scribblenauts. While this was going on, our thaumaturgy and sorcery was getting dodged, since they were not only effective with Script but also very agile. One might think this would go on forever, but Lilith blindsided them and blasted them with Hellfire. Next, Estheriel summoned elite archangels but these fell also, this time to some of our weapons. I got to use my Sword of Sorrow, which was usually story-breaking.

Seeing how particularly effective Azrael's sword and my sword were, Estheriel spoke a word of Script, "***Reveal Past***." Suddenly, as though we were watching a film, all of us saw visions of the past. We saw how Azrael collected her sword. We saw how Tamashii was sent to Niraya, and what Azrael and I had done to resolve this. And we saw how I got my Sword of Sorrow. Estheriel was not a dumb angel, and quickly pieced together limits of our weapons that even I did not know about. "***Lunar Phase - New Moon,***" Estheriel said. Apparently this was possible for an upper-level archangel like Estheriel, even though it seemed unbelievable. I guess angels were different from the rest of us.

The moon that had given off steady light outside the Universe Egg suddenly went dim. This did three things. First, while the light outside had been bright enough to battle

effectively, now it was difficult to see. Second, my Sword of Sorrow became chained up and I couldn't draw it. This is because of the third thing, the weakness of the Sword. The Sword of Sorrow became bound up because Azrael suddenly disappeared, and I didn't know then if he'd ever be back. The Eternal Moon fell to the strange visceral soil with soft thwack, and Azrael's clothes dropped gently in a heap where she had been.

I was a mess. I was crying my eyes out, and was unable to cast a spell or move an inch from my spot. My best friend, my closest lover, and my soulmate had vanished suddenly without a trace. And I, knowing nothing at the time about Azrael's new lunar cycle, believed her gone forever. Since only Azrael herself or someone like Tamashii, could see Azrael in her ghost state, none of the rest of them could tell me otherwise.

Without our help, this was a difficult battle for them. Estheriel had serious regenerative powers, and even the Tao didn't seem to do much good, since Estheriel was here for the right reasons. The angel believed in this mission, and was doing it in order to make human lives more pleasant. Like idealists everywhere, maybe he was right?

Needless to say, the battle was weighted against us. Estheriel was a better fighter than even Michael, who was said to be the one who banished the demons from Heaven in the first place. As an angel, Estheriel's power had less to do with doing push-ups or crunches, and more to do with belief in oneself and one's purpose. Since Estheriel was an idealist, this made them virtually unstoppable. Or so it seemed, until at one point, Tamashii tried to heal our wounds. This was dangerous, because her Empathy hurt her whenever she tried. But for the moment, I was useless, Azrael was gone, and Elias was spent from keeping us alive with all the angels and archangels falling down before us. So while Elias rested and I tried desperately to cheer up, Tamashii tried her best to heal the others no matter the cost to herself. That sorta selflessness often gets held up as a model, but you haven't seen someone bleeding because they refuse to care for themselves.

Then something happened. As Estheriel watched this, a tear formed in his/her eyes. The Script which had been blasting flames and lightning at us started to become more inaccurate. The wounds that we dealt to the archangel started to heal more slowly. Estheriel was getting weaker! Watching Tamashii sacrifice, even risk her own life like this, Estheriel couldn't retain fail in the goals they had. Their heart just wasn't in it. And yet, Tamashii wouldn't hold out much longer. I had to do something! While Ambrosia, Nevras, and the others continued to pummel away at Estheriel with their attacks, I realized that the Sword wouldn't unlock because I had a really bad case of the feels. I was never certain that I'd ever see Azrael again, and my heart was breaking. But the idea of also losing Tamashii filled me with fear. I couldn't allow this to happen! The Sword of Sorrow resonated like the beat of a heart, and suddenly the chains loosened. I drew the sword, and swung, releasing a shockwave attack. It wasn't instant death like a direct strike would be, but it was enough to put Estheriel on the floor. The battle was over.

Or was it? After a few minutes, Estheriel stood up again, pushing from the ground. "You may have beaten me, but you shall never destroy me!" the archangel declared. Ambrosia objected, " Aww c'mon, already! I've practically killed you." Estheriel explained, "You should be very glad that you did not, Ambrosia Brahman. I shall use your name, for you have proven yourself worthy of my attention. Look upon my countenance. Unlike Belial, I have not been transformed into a demon." Estheriel's face was indeed pretty beautiful. I'm still not sure if that's a guy or a girl. She(?) went on to explain, "This is proof that despite a possible error, I have done no evil in this world. Killing a pure angel would be like murdering a child. The act would taint your soul."

Ambrosia looked shocked and horrified, "I almost did that? Why didn't God tell me...?" In the mean time, the moon in the background wavered, and then returned to normal. I guess it was too much for anyone but God to permanently change the timing of lunar phases. Azrael's body reappeared, then as I called out her name, she noticed she was naked and she hid herself, hastily donning clothes while I ogled at her naked body. It wasn't anything I hadn't seen before. It was just so sudden that we blushed. The others were paying more attention to the conversation between those two, and thankfully didn't notice. Estheriel responded, "There are a great many things God likely has not told you, such as the true nature of the Oracle. In this world, all things fade and die. The worthwhile things are preserved through a cycle of renewal." Ambrosia asked what

Estheriel meant, and got this explanation, “Nature, Love, God, certain teachings. All of these pass on from generation, by rebirth or passing on to newer generations. It's not a question of how good or bad someone is, nobody is spared this fate.” So Ambrosia said, “So what?!? It’s not like God can die.” Estheriel laughed, as if to correct us.

Estheriel elaborated, “The reason God is eternal, is because God can choose an heir in order to be reborn. Well God doesn’t really die, so this isn’t accurate. It’s a rebirth if you want to call it that. But it’s more like a resetting or a memory wipe. The last of the Oracles was an experiment, but God realized that only a true incarnation would work. The Oracle can renew God, or they can become God. The former is done when the Oracle dies, but the latter can only be done by taking the role of God and abandoning one's earthly life.” Ambrosia fidgeted with some sort of tablet before returning it to her pockets. She seemed surprised she had it. I helped my beloved to her feet.

Ambrosia looked confused, “ I'm still not following. What will you do?” Then she asked as Estheriel coughed some blood, “You're about to die, aren't you?” After some strain, Estheriel mentioned, “As an angel, I have certain powers... Such as to possess bodies... I could easily become you and take over all existence, ruling as the new God.”

“I'm afraid not,” a voice to the side spoke. Looking that way, we saw the valkyrie leader, who said her name was something like Brunhilde. Brunhilde raised her spear and then tossed, skewering Estheriel right through the heart. Even for an angel, impaling was a nasty business, although Estheriel was able to talk with such a thing. “But why...?” Brunhilde sneered, “Why? You should know by now. We valkyries serve only women and the strongest of men. We function as troops to defend love and life. From my battles with Ambrosia, I have found her more deserving of our ranks than you. We valkyries are women of honor, and using gutless tactics like body-swapping to usurp God's throne is inexcusable. God, let me face punishment for betraying my purpose. I apologize, but I cannot abide cowardice.” She knelt to the ground and waited for God to make a decision. Since Ambrosia had been defined as God’s replacement, I wondered for a second if Ambrosia would talk to her or something, but eventually my question was answered. Ambrosia was not going to do it, this was gonna happen the right way.

And there was a great and might wind, that risked breaking this Egg, but God's heart was not in it. And somehow in midair there was an earthquake, but God's heart was not in it. And there was a fire, but God's heart was not in it. All of use were still alive. And then came a still small voice. And God said, *You understand that you will be bound in sleep for the first man to come wake you up, and will be transformed into the weakest woman*? She nodded, and suddenly the valkyrie was wrapped with flames.

The battle was over. We had all survived, and now we were looking at one girl surrounded by flames yet not burned. She was a tough lady. The latter said to us, “You've got me at your mercy. Now what will you do to me?”

BOOK III ENDING 1

In which reality branches, and Ambrosia goes psycho. Still canon in future works.

TAMASHII

My mother was stuck in a room, as I said before, with three choices. She could kill an angel before he did horrible things, knowing that it could taint her soul in horrible ways. She could walk away, allowing the aforementioned angel to possibly recover and wreak further havoc later on. Or she could heal the angel using her Console that she got from God. But I’d seen her use that before. Most of the others hadn't noticed, but I, with my psychic abilities, am tuned to the frequencies of existence and reality. Ambrosia had almost left this reality for whatever is Beyond The World, when she last used the powers of God, to help others. Oh yes, I imagine I'm not supposed to know. But I'm a sharp kid, I noticed things over the last few years growing up. Should she heal Estheriel this way, there'd be no coming back from it. I'd probably never see her again, until the day I died.

But she didn't make the choice to save the angel. She did what she felt she had to do. In other words, she fucked up (sorry, language) and killed Estheriel, knowing fully that it might make her evil. And that’s basically what happened with her.

Let's tell the story starting from the actual events though. As Estheriel lay dying, she said, “You've got me at your mercy. Now what will you do to me?” I told her something that I'd heard from some bad movie, “The likes of you don't deserve mercy.” My mom basically told me to shush then, while she thought. After a minute or a few, she made up her mind. She said, “I'm sorry, but I'm tired of mercy. Mercy was what allowed Belial to be sealed so long. And God's mercy turned you into such a nuisance.” She pulled out her knife, misusing her memento that she got so long ago from Nevras.

Estheriel was already bleeding, having a spear run through her. She was on the ground and wouldn't have been able to move without worsening her condition. But I feel like if she had been able to move, she would be on her knees begging for forgiveness. Based on what she said next, anyway. She told Ambrosia, “I was only trying to make an ideal world... I'm innocent.” I didn’t like Mom acting like this...

As much as she tried to hide it, I had seen that Ambrosia had an “evil” side. Once, this other her came out while she was sleeping, and I was running around the house. She turned out to actually be very sweet, warm and kind-hearted. In fact, while Ambrosia saw her as evil, she was actually more like Ambrosia’s fun side. While Ambrosia believed in discipline like any sensible mother, but this other Ambrosia was content to spoil me rotten. I didn't just get stuff either, but a good amount of affection. While Ambrosia slept, she took me on trips with Nevras. While she slept, she hugged me and kissed me and petted my hair and told me that I was special. She wasn't evil at all, actually. She was just unrestrained, and Ambrosia was afraid of this side of herself. But I loved her, just as I loved Ambrosia. But I'll admit, her voice always seemed unsettling.

“Wait... I don't think you should do this,” my other mother said. Ambrosia snarled at her, her distrust of her other self clear, “That's all the more reason to do it, isn't it? You're my evil self!” Both I and this other Ambrosia had the same sad look on our faces, but Ambrosia was so consumed with stuff that she didn't notice. Nevras spoke next, “ I'm a bit worried too, Ambrosia. You've become obsessed with hatred.”

For a moment, I saw the mother I remembered. The mother I loved. And then that woman appeared, the one who was bitter from having life happen to her. The old beggar was back, not the woman who became beautiful from being loved by my father. A stern woman who was no mother of mine. This woman said, “No. She deserves to die.” My father also noticed, as he was already in tears. “Please,” he said, “I'm losing you.” The evil Ambrosia told her, “If you do this, I won't exist. You'll have become me...” I can tell her personally that this is not the case, that the main Ambrosia now was acting way worse than this evil Ambrosia supposedly was. But people in sadness don't always see the best of themselves. In the Bible, they had a term for this. “Someone **hardened his/her heart**,” they said. This is exactly how it felt, my mom's heart which once beat with such love was instead committed to a path that sucked. I don't believe my mom is evil. But I think, just like those self-fulfilling prophecies where everyone's trying to fight the future, and then do what they hate, she didn't see any other way besides declaring war on what had troubled her. Ambrosia decided that Estheriel was always going to try to threaten her and our family. She shook her head against her other self, ignoring her words.

I watched some old videos when I was young... well, younger than now. There was an anime show where some androgynous guy possessed by this black blood stuff is being questioned by his shadow, and instead of answering, this kid just says “Pass” over and over again until the shadow starts crying. I was watching the same thing unfold here. Ambrosia stubbornly refused her other self, and her other self was getting more and more sad and frustrated. “No,” Mom said, “his death will end millions.” Evil Ambrosia was on the verge of tears, “Why? Why won't you listen to me? Do you hate me this much?”

I knew my mom. She acted tough, but under normal circumstances, she was a huge sap. She cried on all those old movies during the sad parts, and even cried during really happy moments. Watching her evil self cry like this would usually move her to tears as well. This was more evidence that Ambrosia was not her regular self. Estheriel sobbed, “When I die, you'll become a murderer.” Well, technically Mom had already killed Belial.

It was worse than that. If Estheriel's earlier explanation of just what angels were held true, it was much like eating ortolan, it was a disgusting act that one must even hide their eyes from God about. Ortolan was kinda yummy, though. If she went ahead with this, it

would likely change her. Mom's face was twisted in a mix of sadness and rage. She said, “It's better this way. **Now die**!” She slit his throat with her First Material knife, and I saw her eyes change. You know, how people have sort of bright sparkle or intensity to their eyes? Well, I saw hers dim and turn a duller tone of blue. After that, she started stabbing the angel until it looked more like Swiss cheese than a living thing. We had to pull her away, but she went back and continued until she was covered in blood. At one point, she even opened up the body with her bare hands and started playing with internal organs, until Nevras finally grabbed her and shook her. “What has happened to you, Ambrosia?” Nevras asked, “Have you gone completely mad?!?” She looked like a wild animal!

Her eyes shifted again, as though she had one last trace of remorse, then it was gone. “Heh. Heh. Ahahahaha!!!” Ambrosia laughed. “You still don't understand, do you? The significance of this place. It's not just a lair.” Nevras looked confused, “What are you talking about? What is this place?” She explained, “I'll tell you. Sue me if you think I'm crazy. For awhile now the world you knew was just a dream. God was the only one... Oh and here's the kicker. As Oracle, I was born as an avatar of God.” I shivered, “I'm scared of Mom, Dad. And... what's an aviator?” She corrected me, “That would be 'avatar', dear. A person like me as representative of God showed the traits most prominent of God, so I too existed and could be used as a replacement for God, if God wanted to retire or something. I took over for God, and gave birth to everyone in this area.”

I remembered what Grandpa (Grandma? Mom?) had said earlier, all about us all being characters in a story. I suddenly thought about it again. If God was actually Mom and she was the main character in this story... then that made me a carbon copy of her. Or rather, it made me a carbon copy of Evil Ambrosia. I even had the same general hair color! This was my story, the story of my coming of age. This was the story of Mom's friends, each of them fragments of a single personality. All were God trying to have an adventure, not because there was a real crisis but because the alternative was isolation and boredom. This was the story of the Phantom Virus and the Plague, the former which represented fear and isolation, and the latter which represented pain. This was the story of the State and the Council. The Council was Mom's desire to be strong and independent, while the State was based on that part of her past where she was a beggar who depended on others. Like Evil Ambrosia, she hated that part of herself. It was only when I was born that she began to forgive some of these aspects. All of these things rushed through my brain like an intense vision. In any case, my mind was basically blown. I sat there unable to speak for a moment, completely shocked by this news.

Nevras asked, “So we're not real? You think a love like ours was fake all along?” While sweet, I think he missed the point. She blushed, “Nevras...” Shutting her eyes and acting all disinterested, she said, “Very well. I will spare your lives for now. But soon, I will make them all pay. After all, I created them, so now I must destroy. Balance dictates it, as the Oracle of Tao.” She tried to make it look like sparing us was an afterthought but it was so obvious. Awwww, she does love us! Even while she's crazy and scary.

Not long after when we left this place, we received word that the towns all around the land were being destroyed by some weird magic. Even soldiers and wonder-workers sent to stop this failed. We followed the trail, and it became clear that Mother had been busy. Elias managed to extrapolate that her main target was going to be Opening, before she headed south to other towns. Mom hated Opening, not just for herself, but for what that town put me through. We met her in the forest. Yup, like a wild animal after all.

AMBROSIA

I started killing monsters. I needed the experience, after all. It used to be that people could only find these things within dungeons, after about nine years ago. But suddenly, everything kinda crawled out of the woodwork to attack me. And it was weird, the more I fought after a certain point, the weaker the monsters got. I had been fighting demons and angels, then things like hydras, followed by goblins and orcs, and eventually I got to the point where I was fighting low-level squirrels and sparrows. But I didn’t stop. I was filled with determination. My stats were almost maxed out, and the monsters I fought didn't even present a challenge anymore. It was time to hunt the most dangerous game.

I don't miss those two. After all, they would only mess up my plans. It's better this way, don't you see? It's better knowing nobody ever really existed. For long. Gradually those I knew and loved faded into a distant memory, as I continued to destroy everything. I heard the satisfying crunch of a building I had toppled, and the crackle of sparks as I set it to blaze. The more I destroyed, the ***cleaner*** I felt inside. Those nagging voices quieted down. I heard myself say, "Yes, that's good. Heeheehohohahaha! But it's not enough. In order to be safe from Them, I mustn't stop here. All the people living in small villages, or the forests, I must hunt down." I continued to rant, "Yes, I must kill them all... Or They will come to get me too. I'll not exist. I must kill to stay alive. It has to be done. Otherwise, my quest was useless. Yes... It was useless! Hahahahaha...."

I used the boat left to me from the old king of Kushiyama to make my way to the next town, stopping in a forest to eat beavers. I had only skinned one when a group of people who I didn't remember shouted after me, "Stop right there, Ambrosia!" A little girl said, "Mom, we're here to stop you!" Hmmm, was I a mother? Something stirred in my belly, but my mind didn't remember this. The demon said, "I'm not." And indeed, she took no aggressive action towards me in the coming battle. "Well, ummm. Most of us are here to stop you, Mommy!" the girl amended. The demon walked off, so she was no threat.

I asked, "Who are you? Have we met?" The girl sobbed, "She doesn't remember us..." The blond guy said, "I hate to do this, but we need to. *Attack her*!" And just like that, these people attacked me. The blond used something called a Speed Slash, while the angel tried to attack me with his sword. But I sidestepped out of the way, and they wound up attacking each other. The Druid and the exorcist attacked me with spells, but I awakened my Apollo Crest and knocked everything back at them. The others tried different things, but I shrugged them all off. "Is that really your best? What's wrong?" I asked. The little girl gasped, "Guys, be careful! Her power is fueled by her emotions, and right now... She's totally over the edge. I think we might die here!" I activated my Tao ability, drawing up as Resonance, as I noted, "Something about them is annoying. I must make these voices stop." The Yin and Yang flowed through my body, then echoed against these targets and back. I remembered who it was that I was using my powers against, for a brief moment, before I lost my mind again. Their bodies were badly torn, and they kinda died there. The recoil of the Resonance hurt quite a bit, but while I was bleeding all over the place, I shrugged this off. Zoe and Azrael lived since they were eternal now, but the Tao ability put them in enough pain that Zoe wouldn't be coming after me any time soon. And Azrael would not recover until the next full moon.

I sat there cackling and murdering for what seemed an eternity. Using my powers, I wiped out most or all of the world's human population, along with most of the trees and land animals. Most birds and fish were above and below my powers, so there was still that. I did manage to upset the marine ecosystem however, by catching fish with my pole, then stabbing them and throwing them back, killing progressively bigger fish until I had dead sharks scumming up the water. I sound calm now, but this is much later. I came to myself and realized what I was doing. I could no longer excuse myself with insane reasons. The "scarecrows" of my friends and family now acts as a grim reminder of the time that I went down the wrong path. This will not be the only possible reality.

All of us are God, Monsters, and regular people. When we hate ourselves we become Monsters. When we simply live our lives, we are regular people. And when we love ourselves unconditionally and love others, we become part of the whole that is God. I am not proud now, not after looking back on what I did. I accept that I actually did wrong, and don't try to rationalize it anymore. But I believe there is hope. And so, using my power, I split reality into three branches, as I had done before with the whole Universe Egg rewrite. All of these branches are part of me, so if you see me in another story as a crazy person, don't tell people, "she's never done that before." I most certainly have.

I looked down at my body. My Tao ability uses my mood. When I am stable, it works fine. When I'm depressed, it hurts me. When I'm insane... I had destroyed my friends, and so, I had also destroyed myself. My sense of self had become distorted. I looked like something from *Akira*, I had several tendril-like cancers throughout my body. I couldn't breathe, I could barely see, and my organs were wrecked. I deserved it, for I had pushed away all of my friends. I was alone now. I would join you soon, my love, and I would

apologize. I held your mangled body that I had turned into a scarecrow. I would die soon. I was coming to you. And we would be together. ***Forever***.

BOOK III ENDING 2

In which reality branches, and Ambrosia gets the good ending.

AMBROSIA

Everything happened as before, Estheriel begging for mercy, Tamashii saying that cheesy line, and me shushing her. Ultimately, I had a bunch of choices, but the idea of killing or saving people seemed absurd. I simply walked away, shrugging my shoulders. I told her, “Forget it. I'm not healing you. And I'm not killing you. I don't care about your stupid vengeance against God, I wanna live my life. If you heal up, great for you. Otherwise, that's your problem.” I was leaving this problem what Elias called Schrodinger's cat, although in this case, the “cat” was actually actively being impaled by a giant spear and slowly bleeding to death. I was just gonna walk away. Ah well, I suppose letting fate decide will make everything work just fine. Anyway, my daughter had gotten her big epic quest. It was time for Tamashii to go. She had seen everything.

I motioned to my husband and child, “Let's go, Nevras. You too, kid.” Nevras said, “Of course,” and held Tamashii's hand as we walked out of this place. We picked up Suzaku in the Aiken monastery, and thanked them for watching our bird. It was looking younger, so I imagine our phoenix had immolated itself in the mean time. After we left, the others went back to their lives, but unlike the last nine years they visit pretty often. While stopping the villain hadn’t been necessary, our journey helped us reconnect. Anyway, I finally realized defeating an angel was never our true quest at all.

Lilith and Aqorm are watching their kid grow up. Lilith eventually made up with Michael too, and Michael is actually enjoying being a mother. And every now and then, Aqorm and Lilith show up in Michael's place. They come by our house too, so I see Sastra fairly often. But I haven't noticed Portia around lately. I guess she's busy helping Michael with important stuff up in Heaven? Or maybe she’s become too cool for us?

Zoe and Azrael quit trying to hide it and confessed their feelings. They're so cute together! Wait, I have a picture! See? There they are, sitting under that tree. Zoe is now eternal, having overcome all 108 of her reincarnations. Azrael doesn't seem to age either, thanks to the sword bonded to her, she's looking as young as when we met her! But she does kinda fade out during nights where the moon is new. But I suppose that's the price she paid for stabbing herself with that sword, after all. Anyway, after years of being together, God granted them a miracle. They had a child together.

Sera visits us some too. She's retired from bounty hunting and focusing on raising her child. The good news is she's got money enough to do this without even having any problems. But from the looks of it, she prefers not to bail out her child. Something about building character. Last I heard, she was training her child to deliver milk, do construction work, and plowing fields by hand. Her kid’s kinda young for that...

Yazim Jianne and Selqui are two of a kind. Apparently, Selqui agreed to donate most of her eggs to science experiments with him. I assume they still have a relationship of sorts, but from what I hear, the two of them used their genetic tissue in some unholy gene-splicing process to make some giant squid-like creature, and are feeding it clones of her. They drop by now and then to show off their “baby,” something which looks like Lovecraft critters more than a natural child. Its name is 𐤉𐤄𐤅𐤄 𐤓𐤏 𐤔𐤍𐤂𐤋𐤕𐤉. They do have one (mostly) natural child at Yazim's request though. She’s a blue-haired selkie named Sarai.

That's not the only visitor we get around here, though... Awhile back, this red-haired kid named Bakamaru d'Angeli dropped by. “ Can I play with Tamashii, Miss Brahman?” he asked. I let him, so long as he didn't like try to molest her or anything. “Sure,” I said, “Tamashii, play nice with him. Be gentle.” Tamashii on the other hand, was a punk. “Awwwww,” she say, “but he's weak.” Well, she's not wrong. When she’s got psychic powers that can kill a yak from hundreds of yards away with mind bullets, I saw her point. “Hey,” my voice was stern now, “trust me on this. You drive him away, you'll end

up a lonely woman." I should be suspicious of some boy showing up, but Tamashii talked to him like she'd known him her whole life. Sastra seemed to like him too.

Years passed. We all got older. Tamashii became a fine woman. She married Bakamaru when she was about 18, and seemed to be pretty happy. "Thank you, darling, for being there all these years," said the boy. That boy was cute, I'm glad she met him.

Getting older gave me time to think. All this journey, I was looking for some purpose, some reason for our wandering and struggles against creatures, but maybe Lao Tzu was right and maybe I didn't need to stop Estheriel or Belial. Well, maybe Belial. After all, it should be well within the power of God to take away the challenges of this quest, but that never happened. But why? Then I thought of my companions again, and it hit me. All of us needed this quest. I was a wreck of a person, even if I was secretly God, a homeless mess who could not even get hot food. I was without anyone in my life. Nevras was running away from his parents' expectations and the possibility of arranged marriage. Lilith was a shut-in and Michael was too wrapped up in duty. Zoe was haunted by past lives, while Azrael was trapped by being a celebrity in her tiny town. Aqorm was bored and Elias had effectively created a life where he isolated himself in study. Selqui had made herself crazy somehow, and was sacrificing to Monsters. And Yazim Jianne had lost his dearest one to a terrible tragedy. It had brought Tamashii to her purpose and to the love of her life. In our worst moments, that was when we were helped the most. More than any great purpose, this quest had been to bring us all together.

Then it happened... "Okay, honey, push!" said Bakamaru to a very pregnant Tamashii. My daughter had gotten more beautiful, but as she got older, she had become more hard-edged, and I'm not entirely sure I approved. "What do you think I'm trying to do, you jerk!" she snarled at him. For the next several minutes, she made groaning sounds, breathing out, until at last I saw head, then shoulders, then the rest of the child. It was a girl. They called her Rakuen, the name for Heaven, for she was their greatest treasure.

More years passed, and another change was going to happen.... For you see, while powerful thaumaturgy can allow many people to live long after the normal lifespan, Nevras and I don't have any special powers. When Tamashii got to be middle-aged, we got old. "***cough* *cough* *wheeze* *cough* *wheeze***" I said. Tamashii could tell I wasn't doing well. Nevras and I were sleeping all the time. I was forgetting things. And I limped quite a bit. When I looked in the mirror, it was strange. I remembered an old woman at a graveyard giving me Jar of Human Tears, to protect me from evil spirits in the town of Opening. Why did I look so much like her? But before I could think too deeply, that thought was gone in the mists of old age. "Mother, you mustn't die! I still have many things I wanna do with you," my daughter said. What was her name...? I responded, "You can do them with your husband now. I'm sure he won't mind." I explained that we couldn't all be eternal like those two, that death was a part of life, and that life wasn't about being safe. I explained that I had met all the friends I wanted, and now it was time for my next great adventure in the Afterlife. I was only human after all... I also quoted Azrael's explanation that there are four pains: Birth, Aging, Illness, and Death. Letting going of this pain was essential, and notdying is an exception, a rarity, and we shouldn't seek to avoid death. At least, I think that's what I said. I was pretty senile, so maybe that profound speech remained trapped in my head. Nevras told her, "Listen to her. ***cough* *cough*** I'm afraid I'm not that long for this world either..." My heart beat slower. I felt each beat. I felt a chill. I grabbed Nevras, hoping not to fall. It was time to go, so we left this world. We died in each others arms.

BEYOND THE WORLD

Ambrosia and Nevras wandered through bleak darkness. **This was the end**. They had done everything, and couldn't imagine any more. Neither one of them had any notion of Afterlife, so they began to fall asleep. "My life... It's fading away. Is this how it ends?" Ambrosia said. Nevras nudged her awake and said, "I think there's more for us. As we built a life together, let's have an Afterlife." And so, they continued walking.

Ahead was a cute black cat with one yellow eye and the other removed, a cat that Ambrosia immediately recognized as her Miss Kitty. The cat wandered forward as if to beckon her onward, mewling sweetly as she led her through the dark murk to two other

figures. Near her cat was Nevras's own pet Captain Falcon and a giant wasp to the right. The wasp and the bird had grown in size, now large enough to ride. This was the same wasp she had once led outside, and it appeared to now be intending to return the favor.

The dark world gradually transitioned into one that was a chiaroscuro world. There were dark shadows deep enough to hide one's hand. Yet clouds nearby were bright enough to illuminate the area. Ahead of them stood people dressed like priests from the Joseon period, with translucent black hats. It was basically a fluffy cloud land, besides of course the stark black/white dichotomy. The only thing in fact not using these tones were people. "Really? How cliche,"remarked Ambrosia. It was possible that she was using the word cliche incorrectly. The priests shook their heads, and spoke as one, "What we call Afterlife is a construct of imagination and feelings. The only thing cliche is your imagination. You must build your Afterlife with your heart. You must shape your eternity." Ambrosia said, "You mean... this is wrong? That Afterlife looks like...?" The priests nodded, and again spoke as one, "Whatever you feel. Now build your house. And remember... if you ever get tired of your Afterlife, you are free to return to Earth, reborn."

And so the cloudy world faded away, and was replaced with a world of color. It was Ambrosia's farmhouse with its stone chimney and a woodpile, vegetable field, and a scarecrow known as Mister Zuran nearby. But most of Ambrosia's friends were not there to visit her, so it wasn't as nice an Afterlife as it could have been. The living could only visit the dead twice each year, during the Ghost Festival and on Halloween. During this time, the veil separating the dead broke down for a night or so, and Ambrosia could see her friends now and then, though not as often as while they lived.

AMBROSIA

And so we lived our days for an eternity in each other's company. Sadly, Tamashii doesn't see us much. Time is weird here, so it's been generations since we died. By now, she's probably in her own personal Afterlife. But would it kill her to visit?

NEVRAS

It was like Heaven, but it wasn't always happy. We fought over stuff.

AMBROSIA

But the times we had, these were real. Each day I look forward to seeing Nevras again. Whether we fight, kiss, or just hang out together...

NEVRAS

I know that she'll be with me...

AMBROSIA

I know that he'll be with me...

That was what I really fought for as Oracle of Tao. Not some high-minded "saving the world" nonsense. I fought... to spend my days with a person I love.

BOOK III ENDING 3

In which reality branches again, and Nevras sees God and dies.

NEVRAS

My love (Ambrosia) has a kind heart. I know it doesn't seem that way sometimes. But it's true. When faced between a choice of letting someone go, killing someone, or saving them, she always chooses to save them. After trying all the other options.

Somehow what she did next was obscured from my vision. I saw her holding a clear rectangle, and seemed to be banging down on it with her fingers. I saw a light extended from above, and I saw a burst of prismatic light wash over the body of Estheriel. The angel's eyes opened and they sat up. Estheriel asked, "Why... Why did you save me?"

Ambrosia breathed in like she was gonna give some kinda long and moving speech. She said, "You were right about many things. This world is lonely, terrible, crass, and unjust. People die pointless deaths and it's unlikely to get better. But you were wrong about two things. What the world needs is not God's justice, but God's mercy and love.

And, I'm not God's replacement. I'm God." And with that, she kinda did one of those creepy things where something pops out of your skin. We'd seen this happen with Tiamat, but this one was far less gross. She didn't turn into a three-headed dragon chicken, but instead a big ball of light took shape as a more intensely brilliant Ambrosia walked out of her old physical body. Now Ambrosia was far more like herself. My heart was hurting just from looking at her. The others averted their eyes, but I couldn't help but stare despite reading lore about the dangers of looking at the true form of God.

Before she continued, though, I asked her, "What?!? Really? When did that happen?" She faced me and her kind face was really intense, "Remember when we were fighting Belial and everything sorta blacked out for a second? Well, there was a lot of stuff I didn't tell you." Tamashii, being the troll that she is, couldn't resist the chance to be snarky, yet she had the sense to speak with her eyes averted. That must be hard, not being able to talk to your mom directly. Tamashii said, "The **nerve**! Keeping stuff from your husband like that!" Ambrosia shrugged, "Ah well, it wasn't something that you'd believe anyway."

Ambrosia with an idle motion shrunk the Universe Egg that we were inside somehow without crushing us, resting it in her hand. However, she was new at this. She realized about that time that we were standing in midair. She quickly manifested a clear white disc below all of us so we wouldn't fall to our doom, blushing as she did so. She explained while touching the Egg, "Nevras and everyone else didn't really exist except as a dream, until I helped create them. That's what this Egg we're in is for." She juggled the Egg briefly, then getting bored, returned it to full size in the space behind her. "So now you know..." she continued, with some feelings of fear of judgement for her secret, "You don't want anything to do with me, do you Nevras? Tamashii? Guys?" There was a long awkward pause. I immediately loved her, but was so dumbfounded I was unable to speak for a second. Tamashii thankfully broke the silence, "Are you kidding?!? That's like the coolest thing my mom can be!" She suddenly found herself in a big group hug with me and Tamashii. Her new form felt at least as soft as her body was, and she was very warm to the touch. "We can join you when you head up to Heaven, right?" I asked. She nodded, "Of course! I'll need some company, and you guys are family!" Tamashii asked, "What will happen to God's angels? And for that matter, God?" Ambrosia explained, "They'll still be part of Heaven. My mom and dad will probably be reborn. Estheriel, I forgive you. You're welcome there too." In the midst of all of this excitement, my heart gave out. I saw the others rush to save me, but it was no good. Everything began to fade away...

EPILOGUE

In which there are no endings, because the Author didn't want things to end.

BEYOND ALL THINGS

In the history of religion, very few people have seen the true form of God and lived to tell the tale. It takes an exceptional soul. But Nevras was not an exceptional soul, despite being royalty. He was simply a guy in love with a girl. And so, he died like all mortals, when faced with God. But death is not an end, it is simply a change from living into what comes after. It can be compared to pulling off false garments, to reveal what's underneath. When Ambrosia did so, her soul looked like her body. Ambrosia was always God, God was always Ambrosia. Only the intensity was changed. Seeing God in (His?) true form is nearly always deadly. And Nevras just couldn't resist looking at her.

There have been debates over the years about the transgender population. Some say they are mentally ill for believing that they are a woman trapped inside a man's body. Some say that God made a mistake, and they should have been otherwise. But the material world isn't reality. Once bodies are stripped off, as will happen to all of us after death, what remains is our hearts and feelings. Our souls. I don't think God makes mistakes though, some of us are intended to be tomboys and femboys, so that the soul inside will show the falsehood of physical reality. And so it was that after death, after all things of Nevras's body were stripped away, Nevrasia the woman emerged from the shell. Yes, I know, an earlier ending had Nevras be male in the Afterlife. But this is not the Afterlife, this is the Real World; the world only those able to dismiss all illusion face.

Nevrasia opened her eyes and looked at herself. Souls start as balls of light, which again is why Nevras was either male or female. She didn't have eyes at all until she thought about having a body. Her new hands were long and fine, like a pianist's, her arms were slim, her shoulders narrower, her neck no longer with an Adam's apple, her blond hair longer and wavier than before parting neatly in front and extending down to her hips in back. Moving down her body, her supple breasts, her narrow waist, wide hips, long legs (she was just as tall as before), and cute feet completed the look. She was naked, and yet she was unashamed. She added clothing, but only for style, not for modesty. The air around her shimmered, and suddenly she wore some Mary Jane heels, black stockings, and a gray dress paired with a green mock-turtleneck and denim jacket. Ahead of her in the white empty space appeared God. Or Ambrosia. This one would never call her God, but rather her Dearest. Like many, Nevrasia could choose to be a ghost, to reincarnate, or to go somewhere like Heaven or Hell for an Afterlife. Nevrasia had not chosen any of these, but rather told the Reapers exactly what she wanted. “To be with Her forever,” she said. And so there she was, the Bride of God, a Saint in Her presence.

Ambrosia shone gloriously. It was not the whole bright light that you see in a lot of those Christian movies. It was a more a vibrance of color and intensity. Every feeling was shared intimately. The slightest touch brought a rush of pleasure far more than any physical intimacy. “Hey,” the girl named Nevrasia said. “Hey there,” responded the blue-haired God known as Ambrosia. Nevrasia yawned. “I'm kinda tired. What will we do tomorrow,” she asked, “how about a date?” Ambrosia nodded, despite knowing that there was no real time in this place. For in this place, one could go anywhere and to any time. Nevrasia could be anywhere as one of God’s Saints: to the mortal world to visit friends, to another person's Afterlife if one of them died, or revisit days or hours in life. Such things were denied to a normal spirit, but if Nevras could do them, Ambrosia could certainly do them as God. They would follow each other anywhere. “I'd love to,” she said, “let's meet near Phoenix. At around nine...”

APPENDIX

Calendar of the New Earth

A day is 24 hours exactly. There are no sidereal days, and within a day, the sun rises at 6am (or the "first hour") and sets at exactly 6pm (or the "twelfth hour"). This is what the expression "eleventh hour" means, it is the hour before sunset . After sunset, the time is called Void Time, because it is not measured at all. There are roughly 12 hours here too, but aside from guards, most people are content to stop work and rest during this time.

Unlike maybe the old Earth (assuming the Gregorian calendar was accurate and all the stuff about leap years, daylight savings, and shorter and longer days wasn't made up), every year has seasons and days at the same schedule. A month is thirty days exactly, a season is three months exactly, and the calendar should be four seasons with no irregularly, but there are 5 days extra each year (theoretically 365 days). These get put aside (uncounted), and after every fifty years, there is a 250 day celebration tacked on to the end of the year.

Unbelievably, food for this festival never runs out. This forms an extra-long season known as Jubilee, where crops mysteriously produce enough to for a population everyday. Likewise fish in rivers and lakes spawn at an insane rate as do poultry. Cattle don't reproduce at this rate, but they do produce milk at this rate. After Jubilee is over, animals and plants return to their normal fertility.

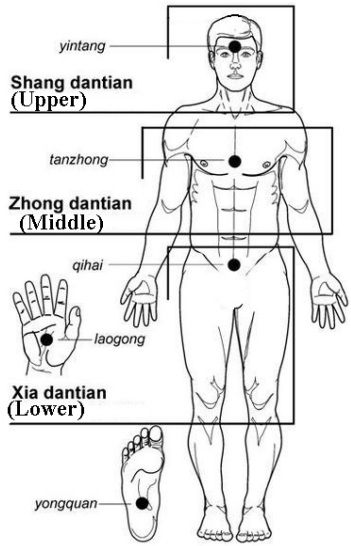
The months in order are based on the Chinese zodiac, with animals based around an element grouped together like this: Sheep (January), Rabbit (February), Rat (March), Pig (April), Monkey (May), Tiger (June), Dragon (July), Rooster (August), Snake (September), Horse (October), Ox (November), and Dog (December).

The days of the week are typically seven days: Fire (Monday), Water (Tuesday), Earth (Wednesday), Wood (Thursday), Wind (Friday), Day of Rest (Saturday), and Holy Day (Sunday). Each weekday has an elemental affinity, so earth-based spells work most strongly on Earth, while fire-based spells work strongly on Fire. On the Day of Rest, spells generally are less effective or outright fail, with the exception of healing spells. The Holy Day allows all magic to work equally well.

During the years of Ambrosia's campaign against Belial, time was literally stopped. That is to say, the same year replayed again and again. This is because the Oracle of Tao exposes a glitch in reality, a visible seam that exposes the fraud of the physical world. After Ambrosia helped give birth to a more real world, time restarted.

Magic

Most magic comes from the heart, not the mind. That is to say, there is a circulation of magic through the blood stream, gathering and circulating through three sources, known as the upper *dantian* (ridge near eyebrows), middle *dantian* (heart), and lower *dantian* (stomach). Geomancy and alchemy use the lower *dantian*, psionics uses the upper *dantian*, but most magic uses the middle *dantian*. In rare circumstances, someone might use all three drawing extra energy from the lower, using the upper to focus and control, and releasing from the middle. These such casters are usually very powerful because of their energy and control, but typically students learning magic to not learn to use it this way.



Magic uses runes in order to use magic, unlike alchemy, geomancy, and psionics below. Runes are a sort of particle of written magic. That is to say, runes can be compared equally well to atoms and ink writing. Like atoms, each rune is composed of smaller runes, and runes can merge together to make magic with compound effects. Like ink writing, excessive water can wash away runes, and they typically have trouble forming underwater. Certain creatures have tough scales or slippery skin and cannot be affected when runes hit them. There are ancient techniques known as solid runes that can bypass some of these issues, though. Because of the ink-like slickness of runes, enchanting items to be magical typically requires making them permanent. Each spell made permanent locks up part of a spellcaster's power. That is, a spellcaster's mana is restored as they rest properly, but each permanent spell is a spell that is never restored.

Unlike times in Earth's past, magic in the New Earth is considered a gift from God. The idea being that God answers prayers, and magic is an extension of that ability. There are people who don't draw their magic from God but through personal effort, though. These are called sorcerers. Still others draw power from death itself, known as necromancers. Necromancy typically destroys the user though.

Thaumaturgy is the purest form of magic, the power to work miracles. Such power can harm demons, so long ago, demons worked to corrupt such power into regular magic, and then further into the destructive forces of necromancy and sorcery.

Alchemy

Alchemy is the art of reshaping matter. It developed after the limitations of magic became apparent. That is, magic for all its power, could not create new life, while alchemy could make chimeras. Magic enchantments either weather away or lock up the magic of spellcasters, so devices that could release energy through physical or chemical means were developed. And for the most part, magic that could create matter from nothing didn't exist outside a miracle from God, while alchemy could make matter by combining raw materials.

But alchemy does have a price, and it is somewhat steep. First, all alchemy requires an Alchemist's Circle, which typically requires time to draw. Second, the energy to do alchemy is not from a magical source, so the caster needs to create it. Sometimes this involves human sacrifice, or draining from ley lines, or other processes. Third, alchemy only really restructures matter, it cannot create things from nothing. That is, you can create a chemical fire of some sort, but the flame needs actual fuel and obeys

thermodynamics. Likewise, you can build a staircase our of rock, but in order to do so either stretches rock thinner (making it about as thin as glass and about as fragile) or it digs rock from nearby areas. This concept is sometimes called "equivalent exchange."

Geomancy

Geomancy is an art almost exclusive to elves, though it is probably possible for other races to learn it. While standing in an area, the person communes with the nearby ley line, channeling massive amounts of energy. Since elves as a race are most attuned to the land, aside from the fey, beings like half-elves are typically bad at producing this energy, and can only do so about once a day.

Psionics

Psionics is the pure power of the mind. Before people used proper magic, using the mind as a source of energy was tried. Such effects were able to greatly alter physical reality around a Territory, but took a great deal of mental strain. The Soulfire (or Dreamweaver as they were sometimes called) had a great deal of active and passive power, but at a great risk to self. Non-psionics can use psionic abilities, but to do so typically results in their brain hemorrhaging from mental strain. Soulfires have a great deal more sturdy brain with regard to using such powers, but there are limits. It would not be reasonable, for example, to expect most Soulfires to lift small cities without strain.

Religion

As a result of the original Earth being destroyed (actually, it mostly became part of the Void), much of ancient cultures was gone. This mostly affected technology, which became buried deep underground away from sight. The Council largely forbade archaeology, since they feared that such research might lead to self-destruction if weapons were found. On the other hand, a fairly extensive history was collected, so most people know (or think they know) much of Earth's past.

Some religions survived, while others were utterly destroyed, and still others merged. Christianity mostly died off, but the arrival of Jesus in Kushiyama, some attempt has been made to revive the religion. Unlike the original Christianity, its beliefs are fairly simple and lack much of its formalized dogma. Many of the Middle Eastern beliefs like Islam, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism blended into the religion of Sakun. The Aiken religion is a mix of Christianity, Buddhism, and Taoism. But all of these religions still exist as well. Buddhism has become Miroku Buddhism, and the new Buddha walks the Earth. Taoism has become a door-to-door religion (though they are not very aggressive in finding followers). There are also a number of cults. Some people worship djinn, others look for UFOs or the like.

One would think that since the New Earth is after an apocalypse, that Revelation would have happened and God got rid of people who believed in different gods. But God's main focus was not to create wind-up dolls but people free to choose anything they wanted. Grace is offered through Christ's death to all who live, whether religious people feel they deserve it or not. Instead of the events of Revelation, Belial corrupted the world before being sealed in an urn. There was no war between God and Satan, because the two are not equals. Satan works as an accuser (like a prosecuting attorney) of humans. But with much of the world following the path of Taoism, his job is largely irrelevant, since humans now have a balanced perspective of themselves and others.

Language

The New Earth has a number of written and spoken languages.

The Common Tongues

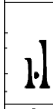
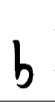
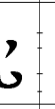
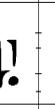
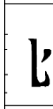
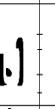
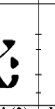
Alphabetic	AaBbCcDdEeFfGgHh
Runic	ᚠᚢᚦᚠᚱᚠ
Ideogram	去最黑暗的地方
Hieroglyphs	
Cuneiform	
Old Script	אליהו מגיע לארוחת ערב
Graffiti	
Pictographic	
Sylvan	ᚳᚢᚷᚵᚸᚾᚹᚼᚿᚲᚱ
Symbolic	ΑΒΧΔΕΦΓΗΙϑΚΛΜΝΟπ
Dark Tongue	飛籲 岁 燻絵糈
Gibberish	

The above languages are all scripts from languages. There are other languages, such as Sanskrit and Korean, but some languages (such as Arabic) have gone extinct. Like on Earth, these many oral languages often share an a system. For example, Pictographic is part .of the Druidic language as well as Fey. The difference is that Fey can only be read by Fey and Elves, because only such creatures can translate it. Fey is based on memories, which are transferred to the reader if read. For example, the symbol reads as "tree" but the reader can tell by reading it whether it pertains to an ash, oak, or spruce, as well as whether it refers to a single tree or a forest. Fey has no spoken language, while Druidic has an alphasyllabic language. Because of the problems of communicating with outsiders, elves have devised Elvish, a Sylvan language devised after observing the Runic and Alphabetic language families. Most dwarves that have dealings with elves have learned to write and speak Elvish. The same was done with Druidic in able to have a way for non-elves to communicate with fey creatures.

Certain scripts are so ancient that despite using them long ago in human history, they are used instead by other creatures. For example, dragons speak Draconic among each other, which uses the Cuneiform writing system. Dwarves use the Futhark, a Runic writing system. Although Runic implies the language of runes, the truth is that runes can be written in nearly any language. Still other languages are based on past history within the area, so a sphinx can usually read Cuneiform and djinn can read the Old Script. The verbal language of Graffiti is Undercommon, a type of slang language.

Of the other languages, Symbolic is typically spoken or written by creatures from other worlds such as angels or aliens. Constructs also use it, since it is a mathematical language in addition to its symbolic elements. The Dark Tongue is used by orcs, goblins, and demons (though they have the same spoken language as angels). Gibberish is known by oozes, Elder Formless, and other strange creatures.

Of these languages, three will be covered in depth. The first is Sylvan, which is used as the basis for the Elvish language. This language uses simple letters for the most part. The second is Fey, which is based on words having a specific meaning based on their pictographic imagery. Finally, there is Druidic, which uses the pictographic language, but adds sounds to make words by joining these together. Let's start with Sylvan.

a	b	ch	d	e	f	g	h	i	j
									
k	l	m	n	o	p	q	r	s	t
									
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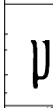		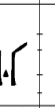		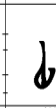			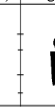		
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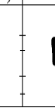
									

Next, there is Fey, which only involves word meanings. Fey has no sounds.

Tree/Nature	Sun/Day	Moon/Month	Eclipse/Marriage
Clouds/Darkness	Light/Holy	Stars/Night	Star of David/Jews
Mountain/Climb	Person/Man	Flower/Virgin	Child/Youth
House/Building	Thunder/Judge	Cold/Ice Crystal	Heart/Love
Up/North/More	Right/East/Toward	Down/South/Less	Left/West/Away
Taoism/Balance	Jesus/Christian	Triangle/Slope	Box/Square
Circle/Pi	Angle/Looking Up	Book/Education	Clock/Time/Hour
Road/Path	River/Trail	Bottle/Container	Chair/Sit
Table/Meal	Sword/Aggression	Shield/Protection	Clothing/Modesty

Hat/Knowledge	Wand/Magic	Stick/Common	Log/Lumber
Music/Dance	Doorway/Closed	Archway/Open	Key/Method
Lock/Puzzle	Female/Creative	Male/Governing	Death/Skull
Egg/Life	Valley/Depression	Sunrise/Sunset	Zero/Not/Void
Wind	Fire	Water	Earth
Snake/Poison	Food/Apple/ Knowledge of G&E	Animal/Pet	Bird/Sky
Sea Life/Ocean	Inside/Enter	Outside/Leave	Around/Avoid
Through/Divide	Center/City	Flame/Cooking	Rain/Tears
Medicine/Drugs	Equality/Justice	Inequality/Injustice	Breath/Air/Spirit
Royalty/Kingdom	Angels/Immortal	Art/Writing	Bed/Inn
Drink/Bar	Part/Pie	Radius/Eat	See/Awake
Ignorant/Asleep	Wall/Isolation	Bridge/Connection	Prison/Slavery
Freedom/Breaking	Hill/Parabola	Coin/Money	Give/Take/Do
Rock/Obstruction	Danger/Fear	Fortress/Castle	Plumbline/Prophet
Measurement	Ship/Airship	Vehicle	Twins/Friends

Couple/Multiply	Map/Earth	Crowd/Army	Mirror/Self
One to Four/Grain	Five/Bundle	Ten/Bow	Hundred/Grave
Thousand/Cataract	Million/Broadcast	Yahweh/God	

The Fey language is psychometric, meaning that its meaning can be understood by touch. But only certain beings (elves, fairies, and the like can do this). The pronunciation is noted in parentheses.

A (ah)	B (buh)	C (chuh/shuh)	D (duh)
E (eh)	F(fuh)	G (guh)	H (huhh)
I (ee)	J (juh)	K (kuh)	L (luh)
M (muh)	N (uhn)	O (oh)	P (puh)
Q (kwuh)	R (ruh)	S (suh)	T (tuh)
U (oo)	V (vuh)	W (wuh)	X (ksuh)
Y (yuh)	Z (zuh)	ba (bah)	bo (boh)
be (beh)	bi (bee)	bu (boo)	ca (chah/shah)
co (choh/shoh)	ce (cheh/sheh)	ci (chee/shee)	cu (choo/shoo)
da (dah)	do (doh)	de (deh)	di (dee)
du (doo)	ga (gah)	go (goh)	ge (geh)

gi (gee)	gu (goo)	ha (hah)	ho (hoh)
he (heh)	hi (hee)	hu (hoo)	ka (kah)
ko (koh)	ke (keh)	ki (kee)	ku (koo)
ma (mah)	mo (moh)	me (meh)	mi (mee)
mu (moo)	na (uhnah)	no (uhnoh)	ne (uhneh)
ni (uhnee)	nu (uhnoo)	pa (pah)	po (poh)
pe (peh)	pi (pee)	pu (poo)	ru (roo)
ro (roh)	se (seh)	si (see)	so (soh)
ta (tah)	to (toh)	te (teh)	ti (tee)
tu (too)	wa (wah)	wo (woh)	we (weh)
wi (wee)	wu (woo)	ya (yah)	yo (yoh)
ye (yeh)	yi (yee)	yu (yoo)	za (zah
zo (zoh)	ze (zeh)	zi (zee)	zu (zoo)
ai (i)	ei (ay)	au (ow)	oi (oy)
An, en, in, un	ax (ahks)	are (ahreh)	ank (ankhuh)

(ahn, ehn, een, oon)			
abh (of)	aum (owmuh)	Yhwh (Unpronouncable)	

This is Druidic, which ties pictograms with sounds. Druidic is a way for those who aren't elves or fairies to communicate with beings that don't have that ability but live near the forest. When elves use Druidic, they tend to replace the numbers with Sylvan numbers. The oral language has uppercase letters pronounced with an "uhh" sound, so B is "buhh" not "bee". It is distinct from an "ehh" sound, and is considered a vowel-less sound. Spliced vowels have their own sounds, but there is a glottal stop between sounds. Therefore, *baK* is bah-kuh, not "bake."

Common

As a result of heavy government in the late 30th century, a universal language was proposed, based on the English language. However, most people complained that English was too difficult to master with its inconsistent rules, so the English language became divided into proper English and what is known as Common. Common lacks subject-verb agreement and word tenses (e.g. instead of saying that you went to the zoo yesterday, "I go yesterday" is perfectly acceptable), and is greatly simplified in general. Every major race understands at least basic ideas in Common.

Unified Japanese

While Common was being proposed, Japan strongly objected to the loss of national identity caused by the forced adoption of Common, so they in secret responded by closing their borders and refusing to accept the new language. In the process, they re-examined all of the borrowed words and leftover concepts, ridding the language of kanji, and removing most of the masculine and feminine Japanese differences (*danseigo* and *joseigo*) as well as making the entire language more casual. In addition, kanji and hiragana became unified, that is to say the main syllabic language became mostly katakana, with hiragana used for prepositions and parts of speech.

Unified Japanese has a few rules:

1. Punctuation is standardized. The double quote (『』) has now been replaced by the single quote (「」). That is, single quote is used for both . Western quotes are used for scare quotes (that is, saying someone is "beautiful" when you mean her beauty is fake) or for quotes inside quotes, while double quotes are used only for excerpts from text. Commas and periods are Japanese, never Western.
2. Names are set aside with spaces around them. Names when introduced, are at the end of a sentence (e.g. ワタシわ・ユキムラ). This is essential, because kanji is no longer used, so names mix with other text.
3. Unified Japanese is predominantly feminine. It's also very casual, so no formal ways of speaking exist. This means there is only one way to say "you" in Unified Japanese. You must say "*omae."*
4. Very few honorifics exist. Rather than ranking, they are based on relationship. As such, the only honorifics now are *kamisama* (when addressing a deity)*, koibito* (when addressing someone close), and *teki* (when addressing someone not on good terms).
5. Furigana is not used except for foreign text, because words are always given standard pronunciation. This is also why *wa* in *watashi* (ワタシ) above is written in katakana, but the second wa becomes hiragana wa (わ) and not ha (は). Therefore, *konnichiwa* is now "コンニチわ."

High Common

Some beings, such as angels, speak a language that essentially self-translates. This is known as High Common, the Holy Language, or the Universal Language. When hearing the language or seeing the language in print, it immediately translates to the language that is most familiar. Not only humanoids, but also animals and plants can immediately understand this language. High Common is the natural language of the Script that angels

use for their powers.

Politics

The world is run loosely by a political organization called the Anti-Government Council. The Council is what could be described as a worldwide anarchist supergovernment, making it extremely oxymoronic and hypocritical, if they weren't incredibly earnest about their duties. The Council attempts to prevent the idea of states by limiting the size of cities and towns. Unlike many attempted world governments, the Council does not see humans as a plague or nuisance, and there are no attempts at population control or eugenics. Nor are any attempts made to control the arms of people, their education, or their religion. Rather, the Council objects to government itself, seeing that the Great Phoenix War was fought over two great kingdoms vying for control over all lands. As such, while people can freely buy weapons, technology of the old Earth is largely kept buried.

Regarding the Council, they are governed by a system of rules similar to the Bill of Rights in the US Constitution, only these rules bind their behavior rather than giving them rights. The Council needs a majority vote to disband Council activity (which usually reverts things to the way they were before the Council), but a unanimous vote in order to reestablish Council authority. Because of this, such a decision is not made lightly.

Each of the members of the Council is a leader in a country, having agreed to live by the rules of the Council. That is to say, the Council sets laws for kings not regular people. The kings in turn give a few laws, but Council members can displace them from the Council if they become a tyrant. Losing Council membership if something that no king wants, as they become considered renegades, and a bounty is placed on their heads. Despite its good intentions, the Council is governed only by leaders of lands that have a majority human population. That is, they don't consider elf, goblin, or gnome lands to be relevant to their decisions. If goblins try to expand to human regions, they often simply hire guards or bounty hunters to massacre them.

In regard to the everyday running of things, this system is less than perfect, but not totally horrible. The price of government is absurdly low. There are no income taxes, property taxes, inheritance taxes, taxes on gifts, and few other taxes. Anyone looking for welfare programs is for the most part out of luck, and services such as plumbing, electricity, and even roads and bridges must be privately bought outside the towns. However, there are some government businesses, such as post offices, liquor stores, brothels, bounty offices, and libraries. All of these are mostly private companies but they are set up to work by the government. That is, a library is given immunity from the effects of unpaid mortgages, and the lights are kept on, but voluntary donations are needed if a library isn't making enough to pay its employees. The lights stay on and the computers stay working (unlike other spellcasters, government employees are trained to be able to make permanent enchantments without cost to themselves, as they attend the Royal Academy), but each of these services is considered one-and-done with no upkeep done. Any repairs are done on a private basis.

Since government workers do not gain money through taxes, each town has their own *creative* scheme to stay funded. Some of these involve anything from sales taxes, to earning money through monopolizing wine or drugs, to actually having the town guard moonlight in prostitution. Another source of money for the government comes from the Royal Academy, since only the very rich can afford to send students there. These are the highest trained spellcasters and strongest warriors, and many of them become bounty hunters themselves if they are not eligible to be leaders.

Economy

The Council has banned archaeology of old technology, mainly to prevent such things as nuclear weapons from being in the hands of people. This is as much to do with saving lives as the idea that no one person should have absolute power and thus become a dictator.

Instead, what is called technology is either alchemy or enchantment of objects. Because of the limits of both, the economy is typically based on single purchase rather

than subscription. That is, buying a car is a one-time purchase, because the magic needed to power it is a permanent enchantment. However, since permanent enchantments are so hard to do, these creates a market where such goods are either greatly marked up, or made so that they are disposable. At the alchemy end of things, items are indeed sturdy, but care must be taken, since alchemy can have an effect on the land.

Justice

The Council has two systems for ensuring that peace and justice are maintained: guards, ninjas, and bounty hunters. The guards are publicly employed, and function much the same way as police. However, they usually only police crimes against the city itself (e.g. an invasion, a nearby town annexing them, or people not paying tolls) or against the citizens from an outside force. They do not have jurisdiction except for the defense of the town. Guards also defend the leaders of towns from assassination.

Second are assassins themselves, the unlicensed force known as ninjas. Ninjas are informally called "tort lawyers" because they tend to take care of people who have not strictly committed a crime but have offended someone to such an extent that vengeance is needed for their actions. They have no concept of jurisdiction, and can use any means at all to meet the terms set by their employer, including disguise, poison, cheap pranks, scams. These terms don't always involve murder, some involve setting the target up for blackmail, or stealing from them. All ninjas are under private contract, and typically obey the terms (legal or not), so long as the employer can pay them for their work.

When a person commits a crime, usually instead of the guards dealing with it, the town sets a bounty. Bounty hunters are considered just by virtue of sincerity. That is, they have no pretensions of their job being about ensuring order, so they ignore petty thieves who steal bread to feed their family, instead going after those who have a bigger bounty. The larger the effect on society, the more likely that a bounty hunter will be involved. This system also acts against creatures and even Monsters. Creatures that become a nuisance are given a bounty notice. Typically, creatures have far higher bounties, so hunting creatures is a lucrative business. All bounty hunters are licensed.

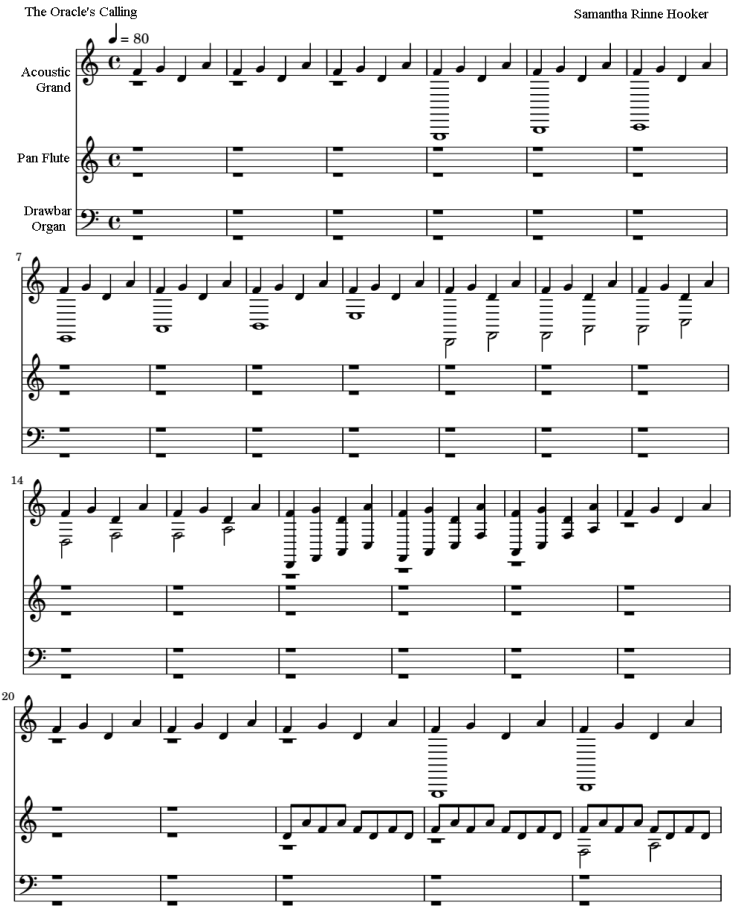
A bounty notice or wanted poster contains the following: the wanted notification which describes the name of the person or creature, the crime, the reward, and the terms. The terms could as for the creature brought alive or dead, or for a specific action to be taken (for example, a photographer could request a photo of a certain creature). Unlike with a ninja, the terms cannot be illegal. The bounty office has more than just wanted posters though. Aside from a wanted poster are evidence forms (these are typically used by informants prior to setting up a bounty hunt), a Private Bounty (which typically involves the person themselves making the payment and doesn't show up on notice boards), and finally an Open Hunt (typically done when a hunt is too dangerous for a single bounty hunter). If an Open Hunt is not called, bounties are limited to one per town. As such, bounty hunters cannot team up or interfere with each other. Wanted posters have a peculiar magic of arrest teleportation. That is, cutting off nails, hair, or bones of a weakened is typically enough to verify that a hunt has been completed, and the creature is sent alive. The magic only works if the creature is somewhat weakened and unable to create more trouble for the bounty office. A person or creature brought into the bounty office is either treated according to the terms (for example, bounties in some cases are about finding lost children) or put into prison. The jail cells weaken creatures so they cannot escape, potentially reducing magic as well. If subject to courts, they have the right to an attorney, and cannot be tried twice. The legal system is fairly casual, as most crimes are personally dealt with by bounty hunters. As such, the court considers that the accused is neither guilty or innocent but that they wish to plea for the mercy of the court.

Finally, if one is desperate for justice, it is possible to pray to God and have him send an avenging angel. Avenging angels know the guilt and innocence of both parties, and will not hesitate to guard the innocent and avenge the guilty. However, this is a risky move, as it is entirely possible the angel will determine that the one who sent them is delusional about their own innocence. This only works in instances where despite all attempts to reconcile or appease the other party, they wished them nothing but harm.

Music

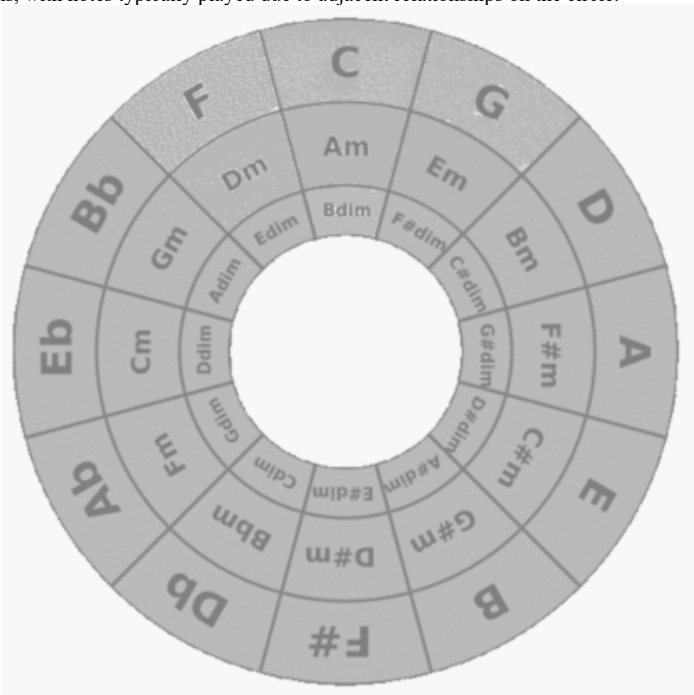
The New Earth has much the same music as ours, mostly found in music crystals. The popular source of entertainment is using Crystal Mirrors, a sort of magical technology that involves adding a crystal inside a slot in a mirror. There are portable (as small as compacts) versions of this, but the main thing to remember about Crystal Mirrors is that while they can re-broadcast old shows and songs, they cannot record new images. These devices aren't animating, but rather capturing previous media on a crystal, so new shows can't be made. Music on the other hand, can be recorded, so there is some experimental sound. Classical, punk, rock, pop, metal, ska, goth, folk, and even gospel music are still popular, but because of the society, much of the music in New Earth does tend toward traditional and folk.

Woodwinds, brass instruments, percussion instruments, and stringed instruments of the old Earth are all present in the New Earth, except for electrical devices. In the place of an electrical guitar for instance are magical guitars. Such devices give new meaning to the phrase "hypnotic music". There are also new instruments, such as the omnimusica. Certain tunes are given for an example of New Earth's music. For example, when Lilith is playing the song The Oracle's Calling on the organ.



While all music from about the 16th century onward is featured, newer music is highly experimental, combining folk music with hard rock, or in some cases using

dissonance. The musical theory of previous periods used a model known as the Circle of Fifths, with notes typically played due to adjacent relationships on the circle.



But over time, audiences had heard all the classical approaches to chord progression, and became bored. Much like complementary colors in the circle for art are helpful but not mandatory, musical artists began to try musical combinations that weren't part of theories of what pleased audience, making music as an artist works with colors.

History

Earth's history is very convoluted. This is due to the fact that history is written by the winners, and in some case people forgot their histories, dooming them to repeat mistakes. Worse, even God cannot give an accurate history of the world, because God is Ambrosia, and Ambrosia's knowledge of history is somewhat prone to mistakes. This is a fairly accurate timeline, considering everthing.

0. God's existence before the Moment of Creation.
1. God creates Light (the Moment of Creation)
2. Ancient Earth (Begin to roughly 2,500,000 BC). Earth is created. There are also hidden advanced civilizations, such as Atlantis and Martians, also time travelers regarded as "gods" by early humans. During this time Pangaea exists, and most ancient religions are developed in response to secular wars.
3. Humans and other life are destroyed by Belial (2 million BC). Earth expands and the Middle Earth is created as the ice caps melt around the North Pole, creating a second arctic rim.
4. Life forms on the Middle Earth (roughly 450,000 BC to 200,000 BC).
5. Humans and other life are destroyed by Belial (200,000 BC). Hhey have no religion, and spend all of their time fighting wars, eventually using magic to destroy themselves. Earth expands and the Earth is created as the ice caps melt around the North Pole, creating a third arctic rim. Ancient Earth is now on the outer rim, while Middle Earth is on the middle rim, both devoid of higher organisms.
6. The Suppressed History (13,000 BC to 2000 BC) - There is a nuclear war, around 2000 BC where there is seven years of famine, due to nuclear fallout. Hindu records

confirm this. The pyramids and other ancient structures are actually secret technology. There are organizations that cropped up after this, and replaced most history with nonsense about cavemen, while occupying major government systems. This marks the beginning of the State.

7. History Starts (2000 BC to 2001 AD). During this time most of what is read in history books is true, but with noticeable omissions. Most history books, for instance will not talk about secret technology, magic, evil organizations, and all the rest.

8. Great Revision (2020 AD). God alters the state of reality. First Soulfires appear.

9. Conditioned Opinion Viral Immunodeficiency of 2019 (2020 AD)

10. Move towards increased globalization and overall corruption (2001-2030 AD). During this time, pollution from Statues of Darkness begins to spread throughout the Earth. A thousand years of dormancy follows this event, as Belial is sealed away in an urn. Statues of Darkness are destroyed but their taint remains.

11. Age of Human Evil (3031-3075 AD). UN and EU become active again. Religious and political-religious groups try to take over and control/kill.

12. Last Christian martyred on Earth (3075 AD)

13. Religious zealots surrender to angels, origin of Sakun (3075 AD)

14. Rapture of remaining Christians (3080 AD)

15. Ungorr the Untamed rises to power (3080 AD)

16. Wormwood meteor found (3081 AD). Ungorr becomes an evil immortal

17. EU and UN support move to support spread of Immortality research (3081 AD)

18. Zombie False Apocalyse (3081-3088 AD)

19. Jewish Apocalypse (3088 AD). The dead rise, and purify these zombies with holy touch. Temple rebuilt and Messiah comes.

20. Buddhist Apocalypse (3200 AD) . Miroku Buddha comes and teaches pure dharma

21. Other Apocalypses (3201-3700 AD). Earth begins to darken from influence by Belial

22. The Great Intersex Revolt (roughly 3778 AD). Men become less able to grow facial and body hair.

23. Taoist Apocalypse (3990 AD). Lao Tzu appears and says the Earth is restarting, people start joining Taoism

24. Atheists saved directly by God (3999 AD). Some people stay behind on ruined Earth, which becomes the Void.

25. Earth split into New Earth and Void (Roughly 4000 AD)

26.Humans are imported to New Earth (4001 AD). Dead are reborn without memories to balance the New Earth.

27. Town of Fitzxembor burned to the ground (4605 AD)

28.Great Phoenix War (5105-5115 AD)

29. Anti-Government Council formed (5116 AD)

30. Lich King of Ghobli (5600-6199 AD). Undead attack until stopped by Exorcist Yuriel

31. Present Era (7000+ AD)

This model of history is what Elias read that shocked him so much. It lacks any content about dinosaurs, and it has a history contrary to the official one with regard to governments and other groups. It also mentions the Middle Earth, which is unknown to most humans. Overall though, this history is also subject to error.

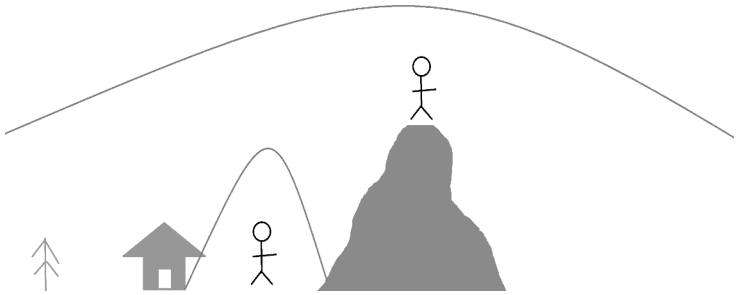
Geography

The geography of the New Earth is slightly different from most stories. This is because the geography is based on a few principles. First, as shown on maps, the New Earth is a flat hemisphere with a domed sky. As such, under normal circumstances, there is no such thing as gravity. In fact, in order to even simulate gravity, the spell Increase Density is needed, or a spell to create an object of force must drop on a target.

So how do creatures stay mostly rooted to the ground? Well, what people in the old Earth called gravity was really just the interplay between buoyancy and density. This same principle means that objects in air float or fall, depending on whether they are lighter or heavier than the air. So spellcasters can allow flying simply by altering the buoyancy of the air. However, doing so costs more magic than simply turning into a bird.

Instead of gravity, there are what are called the "laws of attraction." The laws of attraction include cohesion, adhesion, magnetism, and buoyancy. In some places, there is also subjective attraction, due to magic or some other distortion.

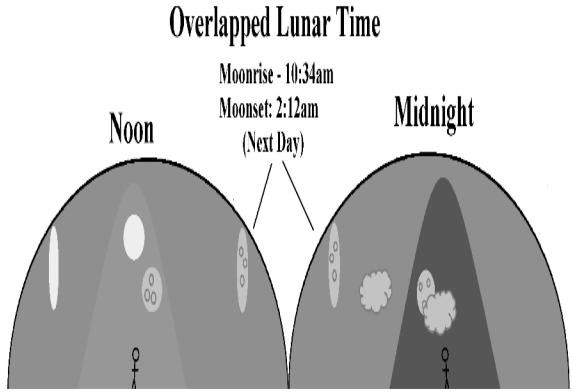
In addition to these rules, there are also laws of perspective. In general, the perspective of things like the sky, oceans, and distant objects is determined by parabola theory, which means that any object can be seen only in relation to living things that can witness it. Such a parabola extends farther at high elevations, and a shorter distance if there are obstructions, as seen by the picture below.



In addition to the basic implications of this, this affects the perspective of airborne object such as the sun or moon, which orbit the Earth.

In order to understand the shape of the Earth, it is helpful to understand timezones and the concept of Plato's Cave. In Plato's Cave, several men are strapped to a wall with chains, while around them paid entertainers show them images reflected from an external light, such as a fire. They think those images are real, but when one of them gets free, they manage to see the fire, the actual objects, and eventually they exit the cave and are blinded by the sun.

But in this model, the sun and moon are themselves flat objects that have outside light (in this case, Light from God rather than a fire) reflecting upon them, so they appear three dimensional and appear to shine. As the sun is moved outside one timezone and into another, the wavelengths of light disperse and can no longer be seen. This represents a series of domes. First, the innermost zone is the dome of perception, then is the dome of real objects, outside that is the dome of the whole Earth. And outside that dome is the Light of God.



Lastly, there are other worlds, but these are not planets in outer space. Instead, this is more akin to Yggdrasil, with worlds bound loosely together by atmospheric bridges, known as the "rainbow bridge" in mythology by the way light splits like a prism. Because human beings need to stand upright, all of these worlds are also flat, and many have their own sun and/or moon orbiting them, but they are more akin to parallel dimensions.